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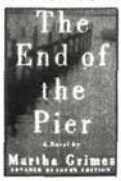

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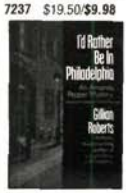

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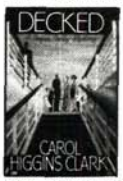

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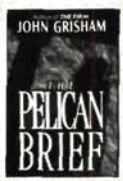

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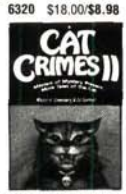

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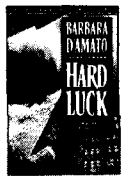

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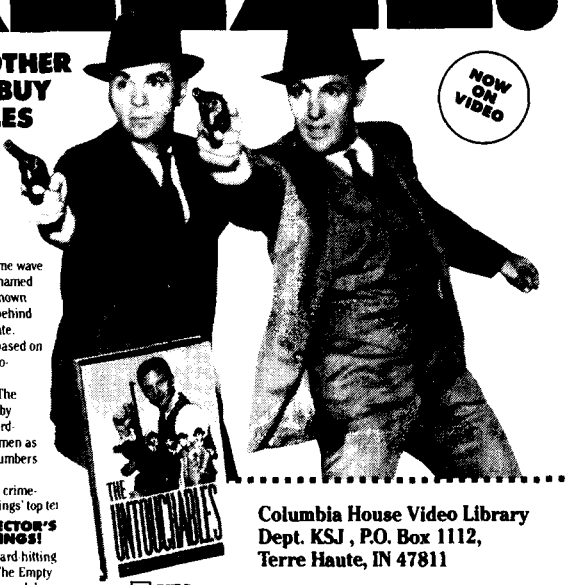

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a *NEW* short story by

DOUG ALLYN

*Doug Allyn's fiction-writing career got off to a flying start in 1985 with a story that won the Robert L. Fish Award. Since then he has received three nominations for the prestigious Edgar Allan Poe awards, the most recent for last year's "Sleeper" (*EQMM, *May, 1991). Mr. Allyn is also the author of two novels,* The Cheerio Killings, *published last year by St. Martin's Press, and the forthcoming* Motown Underground. *The inspiration for his fiction has many sources, the author tells us, including, sometimes, his music. Since the age of fourteen, he has been performing with his band in clubs in northern Michigan, playing songs such as the one that lends its title to this story . . .*

CANDLES IN THE RAIN

by DOUG ALLYN

From a distance it looked like a modern-day siege of Rome. A small army of tents and campers were arrayed in a field across from the air-base entrance, and a ragged line of demonstrators were pacing along the shoulder of the road. But as I threaded my battered Chevy van past haphazardly parked cars and strolling protesters, the sense of conflict waned a bit.

The marchers were a mix of scruffy college kids and only slightly less scruffy adults in fashionably frayed denims, working-class duds à la Ralph Lauren. I gave them points for tenacity though. It was a chill, drizzly day but their spirits seemed high and dry.

Their placards were straightforward: No Nukes, No Incinerator. Ban Bombs and Toxic Waste. And on a less enlightened note: Don't Give America Back to the Redskins.

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The airfield looked secure enough, protected by a fifteen-foot chain-link fence crowned with coils of bayonet wire. There were air police on duty at the gate, and a county sheriff's black-and-white parked on the shoulder of the road, flashers swirling slowly in the rain. The billboard beside the entrance was as formidable as the fence: lightning bolts clenched in an armored fist. Bullock Air Force Base, Strategic Air Command, Crater Creek, Michigan.

The air-police gate guard, starched and immaculate in white gloves and cap, snapped to attention as I pulled up and gave me a smart salute. I returned it on reflex. Old habits die hard.

"Good afternoon, sir, welcome to Bullock. Can I help you?"

"My name's Delacroix. I have an appointment to see the base Commander, Colonel Webber."

"Yes, sir," the sergeant said. "Could I see some identification, please?" He gave my driver's license a quick once over, then peered into an empty van. "Are you alone, Mr. Delacroix? It was my understanding that the Ojibwa Council was sending a delegation."

"They have," I said. "I'm it."

"I see," he said doubtfully. "A delegation of one?"

"You just have the one air base to give away, right?"

"Yessir," he said, frowning. "Still . . ." A bottle arched high in the air from behind the county black and white and smashed in the middle of the road, an explosion of beer foam and splintered glass.

"What's going on across the road, Sergeant?"

"The usual weekend demonstration," he said sourly, handing me a plastic visitor's card. "The local peaceniks have been picketing Bullock for years. Now that it's closing, they're griping about the base incinerator staying open. No pleasing 'em, I guess."

"At least they care enough to get wet," I said.

"Or they ain't got sense enough to get outa the rain," the sergeant said. "You'll find Colonel Webber at the base reception center just up the road. Please keep your pass with you at all times. Enjoy your visit, Mr. Delacroix." He waved me past and saluted. This time I didn't return it.

The base reception center was easy to find. It was the only building with cars parked in front of it. The others I passed were all closed and padlocked. On a field that once supported an entire wing of B-52s, only one solitary plane remained on the tarmac, a transport of some kind, with USAF markings. Beyond it, the runway stretched

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away endlessly into the silvery drizzle, silent and empty as a parking lot on the moon.

The portico in front of the entrance was draped with a red-white-and-blue banner. Welcome Michigan Ojibwa Council. I brushed the road dust off my corduroy sportcoat, straightened my tie, and walked in.

The reception room was jammed, a cocktail conclave in full swing, mostly civilians, men in suits, women in spring dresses, with a smattering of men in USAF blue uniforms scattered through the crowd. A gaggle of reporters and cameramen were clustered near the door and a refreshment table piled with sandwiches and hors d'oeuvres. Conversation died a slow death as I entered. I had a momentary flash of a half-forgotten dream, walking into high school minus my trousers.

A mid-thirtyish Native American woman in a stylish umber suit, her dark hair cropped boyishly short, left her companions and walked over. She had an open, honest face, and an eager smile. "Hello, I'm Eva Redfern. Are you with the delegation?"

"Not exactly," I said. "I am the delegation. My name's Delacroix, tribal constable from Algoma County. Can we talk somewhere for a moment? Privately?"

"I think we'd better," she said, her smile fading. A pity. I followed her back out under the portico. "Now, what's going on? When are the others arriving? We're running late already."

"We're going to run a little later, I'm afraid. The council voted last night to send me down to inspect the facility. If everything checks out, I've been authorized to accept the base on their behalf. Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" she echoed, stunned. "Are they out of their minds? I've spent weeks negotiating this arrangement. The transfer is set for this afternoon, and this is *not* a done deal, Delacroix. Not until the papers are signed. If we stall—"

"No one's stalling. Anytime somebody wants to cede land back to the tribes we'll take it. They just want me to take a last hard look at it."

"No offense, Mr. Delacroix, but this is hardly a police matter. Why did they send a constable?"

"Because I know a little about military bases. I served on a few. Look, I'm not your enemy, Miss Redfern, but I have my instructions. The sooner I carry them out, the sooner we'll get things back on schedule. Unfortunately, since they only called me in on this last

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night, I barely had time to scan the paperwork involved. Would you be kind enough to brief me? Please?"

Irritation and professionalism skirmished in her dark eyes for a moment. Professionalism won.

"All right. In a nutshell, Bullock is being closed. There was a government auction, and Kanelos Waste Disposal won the bidding. But since all Mr. Kanelos really wants is the base waste incinerator and a few hundred acres of runway for parking, he's offered to cede the base to the Ojibwa Council in return for a permanent lease on the incinerator and parking area."

"Which sounds almost too good to be true. Why should he give us the base?"

"To avoid taxes," she said simply. "Since the state can't tax tribal land, Mr. Kanelos can operate the waste facility tax free, and we get roughly five thousand acres of land, *gratis*."

"Most of which is covered with concrete," I said.

"Dammit, it's still a good deal for us, Delacroix. Have you ever heard the old saying about looking a gift horse in the mouth?"

"Yes, ma'am. I also remember one about Greeks bearing gifts. Shall we get on with this?"

"I guess we haven't much choice. But by God, you'd better not blow this deal."

Redfern led me through the crush to a corner where the base commander was holding court. There was no other word for it. In his impeccably tailored blue uniform, close-cropped sandy hair, with just a trace of silver at the temples, Webber cut a striking military figure. The granite-faced black master sergeant standing half a pace behind him added to the effect. Webber was chatting with a gaunt vampire of a man, fortyish, with blue jowls, and fluid-filled pouches under his eyes. He was wearing a dark suit and shirt, a single strand of gold chain nestling in the hollow of his throat.

"Colonel Webber, Mr. Kanelos," Redfern said, "I'd like to introduce Mr. Delacroix, of the Ojibwa Council." She gave them a quick briefing on the situation. I expected annoyance, and got it.

"Mr. Delacroix," Webber said coolly, not bothering to offer his hand, "what's the problem? I was under the impression everything was arranged. Some members of the council having . . . reservations, so to speak?"

"As far as I know, everything's a go, Colonel," I said. "Or it will be as soon as I complete my inspection."

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"But what kind of a survey can you do in a few hours?" Kanelos said heatedly. "The base is six thousand acres. Look, I've put myself on the line for you people. I stretched myself to my financial limits to win the bidding and I'm even giving hiring preference to Indians at the incinerator facility. Hell, I should think you people might show a bit more gratitude—"

"Easy, Frank," Webber interrupted, "the constable's just following orders, and as a soldier I can relate to that. Sergeant Jenkins, why don't you give Delacroix a tour of the base, show him whatever he wants to see. Frank, we'd better talk to the newspeople. I don't want any bad press over this." He stalked off without a backward glance, sweeping Kanelos along in his wake.

The sergeant shrugged. "Don't mind the boss. He's used to having people jump when he says frog. What do you want to see, Mr. Delacroix?"

"The major facilities, PX, hangars. As much as I can in the time we have," I said, watching the colonel and Kanelos disappear into the mob scene.

"I'm coming too," Redfern said.

"Then we'd better get started," Jenkins said. "The power's already been shut off to the perimeter lighting. When it gets dark out on the field these days, it really gets dark."

"What happened to the command and electronics bunkers?" I asked. We were in a closed Jeep, humming down a rain-slick runway toward the shadowy mountains of a hangar, Jenkins driving, me riding shotgun, Redfern in the back seat.

"All strategic or classified equipment was dismantled and shipped back to SAC headquarters, or destroyed on site," Jenkins said. "We blew the bunkers, filled 'em in, and laid sod on the graves. How do you know about bunkers? You serve on a base?"

"A few," I said. "U Bon, Thailand, and Tan Son Nhut."

"No kidding? I was U Bon during the war. When were you there?"

"When I was too young to know better."

"I know the feeling." Jenkins smiled, relaxing a little. "Okay, if you know bases, then you know there ain't all that much more I can show you. You've seen most of the buildings, there's really nothin' else to see but a lotta open concrete."

"And trucks," I said. "What are all those trucks doing on the far end of the runway?"

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"Toxic waste tankers, waitin' their turn at the incinerator. Must be twenty of 'em down there at any given time. They come from all over the state. It's big business, waste disposal. It's closed for the weekend now, but come Monday they'll be humpin'. Pardon my French, ma'am. Sometimes when the wind's right, it smells a little funky, but mostly you can't hardly tell it's there. You want to drive over, take a closer look?"

"No, what Kanelos does with his end of the base is his business. I think I've seen enough. Let's head back."

"Fine by me," Jenkins said, wheeling the Jeep in a quick U-turn. "I served three tours on Bullock. Hate to see it like this. It's like attendin' your own funeral."

"I should think you'd be happy," Eva said. "No more wars, or at least no big ones."

"Oh, I don't miss war, ma'am. Nobody hates fightin' more'n the people who might have to bleed. But soldierin's an honest trade, and not such a bad life. How 'bout you, Delacroix? You ever miss the life?"

"The people sometimes," I said. "Never the life. What's all the hubbub over by the entrance?"

"Antinuke parade." Jenkins grinned, checking his watch. "Right on time, as usual. Wanna check it out? Way the world's goin', it may be the last one."

Redfern sighed. "I certainly hope so."

"Yes ma'am," Jenkins said, his smile fading, "me too."

Jenkins parked the Jeep in the reception-center lot and the three of us trotted briskly to the portico. The rain had started again, a steady, chilly drizzle, driven by the wind. The media people and some of the party-goers had wandered out to watch, but except for the cameramen filming the march through the fence, no one strayed from shelter. There was no reason to do so.

The local peace movement seemed to be winding down with a whimper, not a bang. A line of demonstrators formed a lopsided ring in the road opposite the gate. They were carrying candles, but except for a few who had umbrellas as well, most of the flames guttered in the first few moments. Still, I had to admire their persistence. They marched in a circle in the blustery dusk and drizzle for ten minutes or so, singing "Give Peace a Chance," out of tune, and out of step with each other. And with the times.

"Not much of a show, is it?" Colonel Webber said, moving up beside me. "Not like the old days. A few years ago there were a

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couple of hundred every weekend, blocking the entrance, chaining themselves to the fence, and being a general nuisance. Arrogant fools, the lot of them. They simply didn't see the big picture."

"I served a dozen years, in two wars, and I'm not sure I ever saw it either," I said mildly. "Maybe the picture seems clearer up at forty thousand feet."

"Perhaps it does," Webber said. "Sergeant Jenkins tells me you've finished your tour. I take it you're satisfied?"

"Yes, sir. As far as I'm concerned we can finalize the transfer tomorrow. I'll phone the council tonight, and—"

But Webber wasn't listening. He'd turned, frowning, peering into the drizzle. Even the marchers gradually stumbled to a halt, listening. Out on the tarmac, behind the curtain of rain, there was the sound of drumming. Tom-toms. And the chanting of many voices, instantly recognizable as Native Americans. But not a tribe I knew. Not Ojibwa.

"Sergeant," Webber snapped, "get out there and secure that aircraft. I don't know what's—"

WHOOOMP! Suddenly, far out on the runway, a pillar of fire erupted, a hundred-foot geyser of flame. And then there was an unearthly wail, louder than the drums and chanting. And a figure came running toward us out of the rain, a human being, ablaze, engulfed in fire, howling like a beast. He staggered, then fell to his knees, crawling like a smashed insect, screaming.

Jenkins was the first to react, sprinting for the Jeep. I followed, scrambling into the passenger's seat as he gunned the Jeep out of the lot and raced down the runway toward the burning man.

He jammed on the brakes a few yards short of the figure on the tarmac, and I banged headfirst into the windshield, hard. Jenkins yanked a portable fire extinguisher from its dash clip and ran to the figure cowering on the concrete. I followed on shaky legs. He quickly fogged the man down, then trotted beyond him and killed two smaller fires as well.

I knelt beside the blackened man, dazed, uncertain. His clothes were still smoldering, and he was moaning, in soul-deep agony. And I didn't know what to do. He smelled smoky sweet, almost . . . I recoiled mentally from the thought.

"Mister," I pleaded softly, "please, just hang on, okay? Help's coming. . . ."

The moaning stopped. And the breathing. My God. I tried to roll him onto his back to give mouth-to-mouth, but his body was rigid.

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His arms were locked over his face as though they were welded to it and I couldn't pull them away. And then a piece of seared flesh peeled off in my hand, and I lurched to my feet, gagging, and stumbled off down the runway, staggering like a gut-shot bear. Fleeing the smoking body. And the horror.

Jenkins caught me after twenty yards or so, grasping my shoulders, steadying me down to a walk, then stopping me. We stood there for a long time in silence, in the rain.

Behind us, the sheriff's patrol car screeched to a halt beside the Jeep. Doors slammed. People were shouting. And still Jenkins and I stood there. Holding each other. Like family at a funeral.

"Are you all right?" he asked at last.

"Yeah," I managed. My voice sounded as weak and shaky as I felt. "Is he . . . ?"

"He was dead before we got there," Jenkins said, releasing me cautiously, as if afraid I might fall. "He just didn't know it. There was nothing you could do. Nothing anyone could do."

He turned and trudged slowly back to the crowd gathered around the figure on the field, shrouded now by a blanket.

The sheriff rose slowly from beside the body, carefully unfolding the charred remains of a wallet.

"Buck," he read softly, "Geronimo G. My God, it's Jerry Buck." Eva Redfern paled and turned away, her eyes swimming. I touched her arm.

"You know him?" I said.

"I, ahm, no," she said, swallowing. "Not really. He's Native American but he's not Ojibwa. He's just a side—he came up from Detroit a year or so ago."

"A sidewalk Indian," I said.

"Yes," she nodded. "Lakota, I think. From out West somewhere. Montana maybe. Drank his way out of a line job at Ford. Moved up here, did odd jobs. He was an alcoholic."

"Why would he do this?"

"I . . . don't know. I didn't really know him well."

"When you got to him, did he say anything to you?" the sheriff asked me.

"No, he . . . didn't speak. He couldn't."

"Well, it's apparently a suicide," the sheriff said, glancing around. "Had to be. Nobody else could have been near him out here. Found a gas can back on the tarmac maybe sixty yards away. And what's left of a pile of rags. And a boom box. That's what the Indian music

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was. Apparently he just turned on the tape, doused himself with gas, and, ahm . . . set himself afire. Crazy. Had to be crazy."

"Maybe not," I said slowly.

"Why not?" Jenkins asked. "You know him?"

"No. But even a crazy wouldn't choose to die like this. It's too . . . horrible."

"But what makes you think—?"

"Dammit, I've seen this before! My first tour in 'Nam, the monks were burning themselves in the damn streets! And people said they were crazy. And nobody listened to them!"

"Easy, bro," Jenkins said quietly. "This ain't no Vietnamese police state. We're in backwoods freakin' Michigan. If the man had a point to make, he didn't have to smoke himself to do it. All he had to do was walk up and speak his piece, right? Nobody woulda stopped him."

"I don't know," I said, swallowing, trying to clear my head. "All I know is, the base was supposed to be transferred to the Ojibwa today. He must have been trying to stop it for some reason."

"You can't be sure of that," Jenkins said.

"You're right, I'm not. But I'm not going to go ahead with the transfer until we know."

"Look, Mr. Delacroix," Colonel Webber said, stiffening, "I know this has been a shock, to all of us. But surely the act of the demented individual—"

"You don't know he was demented," I said.

"But he *was* crazy, or nearly so," Redfern said. "He was borderline retarded and an alcoholic as well. Who knows what was in his mind? Delacroix, the colonel's right, this is too important to our people to stop now. He was just—"

"A drunk," I finished. "And not even Ojibwa. So forget it? Business as usual?"

"That isn't what I meant," she said, flushing. "It's just that—"

"Mr. Delacroix, I've tried to be patient, but I have my orders," Webber interrupted. "I agreed to delay the proceedings until tomorrow, but that's the best I can do. I must have your decision then, or I'll have to withdraw from our agreement. Since the man's death occurred on the base, it's technically a military matter, so if you wish to make inquiries, I can loan you Sergeant Jenkins to give you some official standing. I assume you'd have no objections, Sheriff Brandon?"

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Brandon shrugged. "No, sir. It's a straightforward suicide. The decedent's state of mind isn't really a police matter, and frankly I've got my hands full as it is. As long as you don't harass anybody, make all the inquiries you like."

"You don't seem too happy about this," I said to Jenkins. We were in his Jeep, headed toward the main gate. Eva Redfern had stayed behind to try to pacify the colonel and Kanelos.

"I'm not," Jenkins said bluntly, keeping his eyes on the road. "I put up with these peacenik crazies every weekend for years, picketing the base, blockin' the gate to get themselves arrested. Now I'm one day away from gettin' outa here and . . . I got my own job to do, you know?"

"Maybe if you'd done it better we wouldn't be in this mess."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're in charge of base security, right? So how did this guy manage to get out in the middle of the runway?"

"Wouldn't be hard. He couldn't have climbed the fence carrying the boom box and a gas can, so I'm guessin' he just cut the fence and walked in. The electronic barriers were disconnected last month when the last of the classified equipment was shipped out."

"And the fence isn't patrolled?"

"We inspect the perimeter once a shift, about every eight hours. I've only got six men and I need 'em at the gate."

"What about guard dogs? Most bases use them on the perimeter."

"We, ahm, we haven't used the dogs in a while. To be honest, I haven't worried much about security. Hell, there's nothin' left on Bullock worth stealin'."

"Maybe not," I said grimly, "but apparently there was something worth dying for."

Jenkins eased the Jeep cautiously down the lane between the demonstrators' tents and campers. There were only a few dozen left. He parked beside a battered trailer, covered with bumper stickers: No Nukes, Peace Now. The usual.

"This is Doc Klein's trailer," Jenkins said, switching off the Jeep. "He's been organizing peace marches since the sixties, and bugging me for at least ten years. If anybody knows anything about your guy, the doc will."

"Will he talk to me? With you there I mean?"

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"No sweat," Jenkins said drily. "Gettin' the doc to talk isn't a problem. It's gettin' him to shut up. Come on."

We jogged through the downpour to the trailer door. Jenkins rapped and after a moment the door swung open, revealing a squat stump of a man, fiftyish, balding, with a fringe of shoulder-length, baby-fine blond hair, and a neatly trimmed blond beard. A bulldog pipe was clamped in the corner of his jaw. "Well, well," he said evenly, "if it isn't my favorite arresting officer."

"Doc," Jenkins said, "can we see you a minute?"

"Of course, come in, come in. I wouldn't leave a dog out on a night like this. Or a sergeant."

Jenkins introduced me to Klein, and we shook hands. The three of us filled the postage-stamp camper like pickles in a jar. I sat on the narrow cot that stretched across one end of the room, Jenkins leaned against the door, while Klein sat in the lone chair at the tiny table for one. A pot was burbling on the small camp stove. The aroma of chili and cherry-blend pipe smoke filled the room like incense in a bazaar.

"Mr. Delacroix, I can't tell you how sorry I am about what happened today," Dr. Klein said earnestly. "We're on opposite sides of this matter politically but, well, I'm sorry. It's a terrible irony that after a dozen years of peaceful demonstrations, such a thing would happen on the last day."

"Did you know the man who died, Doctor?" I asked.

He nodded. "A little. As well as anyone, I suppose. He, ahm, he drank, you know."

"So I understand. You said we're on opposite sides. Why? What have you got against us?"

"Against the Ojibwa? Nothing. My goodness, your people have been my life's work."

"The doc's an archaeologist, specializin' in Native American culture," Jenkins said. "When he's not playin' rabblerouser, that is."

"I see," I said. "Then why is your group opposed to our taking over the base?"

"Because of the way it was arranged. We believe you're being used."

"Used by whom?"

"By Kanelos, and Webber as well. Kanelos didn't win the bidding, you know. The high bidder was a salvage company that intended to dismantle the buildings and tear up the runway for the scrap con-

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crete. Colonel Webber awarded the bid to Mr. Kanelos as being least disruptive to the community."

"Hey, he was right," Jenkins put in. "It'd take a helluva lot of blasting to break up the runway. It's a foot thick, most places."

"More disruptive than flying B-52s loaded with nuclear weapons out of there twenty-four hours a day?" Klein countered. "At least when the blasting was finished, we'd have the land back. As it is, we're trading one hazardous nuisance for another."

"But the incinerator isn't new, is it?" I asked.

"No," Klein said, "but it's never been operated on the scale it is now. And by trading you the land in return for a lifetime lease, Kanelos not only avoids paying taxes, he also avoids federal EPA inspections. Did you know that?"

"No," I said, glancing at Jenkins. "I didn't. And Jerry Buck? Was he strongly against the transfer too?"

"Jerry? No, not that I know of," Klein said, puzzled. "He was hardly the political type."

"You mean he wasn't part of your—group?"

"No. Not at all."

"But you said you knew him."

"I did, but not from the movement. We're doing an archaeological dig at an old Anishnabeg burial ground just west of the base. Jerry worked for me there, doing manual labor, catch as catch can. For beer money, really."

"Look, I don't understand, Doctor," I said. "If he wasn't political, why on earth would he have done what he did?"

"I honestly don't know. I've been asking myself the same thing since they told me it was Jerry. Joe Gesh might be able to tell you more."

"Joe Gesh?" I noticed that Jenkins stiffened at the mention of the name.

"He's a local character, an Ojibwa, lives in a shack on the edge of Bullock swamp near the burial ground. Jerry was staying with him out there, learning what he could."

"About what?"

"How to live in the past." Klein smiled. "Old Joe's an atavism, a throwback, the last of the wild Indians. He helps me at the dig occasionally, identifying tufts of decorative fur or animal tracks. He's incredibly knowledgeable."

"Oughta be," Jenkins said. "He eats most anything that walks or crawls back there."

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"I guess we'd better talk to him," I said, rising. "One last question, Doctor Klein, could Buck's death have anything to do with this burial-ground dig you're doing? Will the transfer affect it in any way?"

"Nothin' to affect," Jenkins snorted. "I been back there, ain't nothin' *to* see."

"He's right on both counts," Klein said, smiling. "There is very little to see. Cracked stones from fire pits, a few pottery shards, discarded tools. The Anishnabeg lived on this land for nearly fifteen hundred years, and left almost no traces. I wish we could say the same. But the dig won't be affected by the closing of the base. And I doubt that it mattered much to Jerry anyway. He wasn't really serious about the work."

"Maybe not," I said, "but he was damn serious about something."

"Yes," Klein nodded soberly, "I guess he must have been."

"You know this Gesh character, don't you?" I asked. We were in the Jeep, following the narrow track along the outside of the perimeter fence.

"I know him," Jenkins said grimly. "Tangled with him more'n once. And if Buck was livin' with that ol' man, it might explain a lot about him goin' off the deep end."

"Why?"

" 'Cause Gesh is nuts, that's why. Lives back in the swamp like the last damn Apache or somethin'."

"Or Ojibwa," I said. "Why did you tangle with him?"

"Because base security is my job, and every now and then we hear gunfire back in that swamp. And we have to check it out. And that old man ain't heavy into hospitality, I'll tell ya."

"Maybe he was poaching, thought you might be the law."

"No," Jenkins said positively, "it wasn't that. He knew damn well we were air force. Even recognized my rank. Kept his gun on me the whole time anyway."

"And you just—let that pass?"

"Yeah, well, maybe I shouldn't have." Jenkins sighed, peering past the wipers into the downpour. "But I didn't figure it was worth gettin' anybody killed over, and that's what would've happened if we'd tried to disarm him. He was scared to death of us, and crazy as a loon."

"Why do you say he was crazy?"

"He was talkin' crazy. And he kept throwin' tobacco at me."

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"Tobacco?"

"That's right. Held his rifle in one hand, aimed at my belly, and kept tossin' bits of loose tobacco at me, little pinches out of a can. Prince Albert, I think it was. And talkin' right out of his head."

"About what?"

"Ghosts," Jenkins said, glancing over at me with a fox's grin. "You know, I'm a black man in a white man's country, and I been called a lotta things in my time, but never a ghost. He kept callin' me a ghost. You sure you want to talk to him?"

"No." I sighed. "But I guess I have to. And maybe I'd better see him alone, if you don't mind."

"Hell no, I don't mind. Best news I've had all day," Jenkins said, easing the Jeep to a halt. He shrugged out of his raincoat and gave it to me. "There's a flashlight in the glove box. See that path up ahead to the left? It'll take you back to old Joe's shack, half a mile or so back in the swamp. Seems like it goes forever, but stay on it. And bro? You watch your ass, hear? If that ol' man wastes you, I'm gonna have to fill out a godawful stack of paperwork."

I didn't bother to reply. The rain was on me in an icy torrent the moment I stepped out of the Jeep, like standing under a waterfall. Jenkins's raincoat was little help. I was soaked to the bone before I'd stumbled fifty yards down the muddy track.

I've hunted all my life, so the trail wasn't all that hard to follow. Rough going though, sodden, slippery with uncertain footing. Tag alders and cedar saplings clawed at me out of the darkness, as if asking me to bide awhile, to share their loneliness. I spotted the faint glow of a lamp ahead.

Gesh's shack wasn't a shack exactly. It was a hogan, a rectangular log hut roofed with sod. It was crude, but not totally primitive. It had glass windows, and tarpaper had been tacked over a patch where the sod had washed away.

"Hello," I shouted. "Mr. Gesh?"

No answer. The lamp in the cabin winked out. "Mr. Gesh, my name's Delacroix. I'd like to talk to you."

"What do you want?" The voice was a low rasp, barely louder than a whisper.

"For openers, to come in out of the rain. I have news for you."

After what seemed like a month, a match flickered in the cabin and the lamp glowed to life. The door swung slowly open on leather hinges. "Come ahead. But move slow."

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Even after the darkness of the forest, the hogan was dim, lit by a single kerosene lamp hanging from a sapling rafter. The air was thick with the stench of tallow and rancid suet from the hides stretched over ash hoops hanging on the walls, raccoon, lynx, muskrat. Gesh watched me from the shadows in the far corner of the room. He was smaller than I expected, a wiry little gnome of a man, grey hair tied back in a ratty ponytail, a brown, seamed face, carved from mahogany. He was wearing a green-and-black plaid flannel coat, faded jeans, worn moccasins. Even his rifle was small. A bolt-action Marlin .22. A trapper's gun. After a moment he lowered it, and leaned it in the corner.

"You're from up north someplace, aren't ya?" he said.

"Yes, sir. From Algoma. Bear Clan. How did you know?"

"Because your eyes don't get big. The young ones come out here from town, they always look around like my house is a museum or somethin'. But you know what things are," he said, gesturing at the hides, the hogan.

"I trapped for a few years, after I got out of the army," I said. "Lived with the Cree, up in Ontario."

"What was it like, that country?"

"Empty," I said. "And hungry. Winters last a hundred years."

"Here too, sometimes." He nodded. "Sit. Sorry it's cold in here, I'm outa kerosene for the stove. Here, wrap up in this, you'll be warm after a while." He handed me a frayed army blanket. I draped it over my shoulders and sat on a tree-stump stool that obviously doubled as a chopping block.

"You bring anything to drink?" Gesh asked.

"No," I said. "Sorry. I didn't know I was coming."

"It's okay." He shrugged. "You said you had news. Bad, right?"

"I'm afraid so. They tell me Jerry Buck was staying with you."

"A few months. Tried to dry him out, straighten him out. Didn't work. What happened to him?"

"He, ah, he's dead, Mr. Gesh. Soaked himself with gasoline, and . . . he burned."

"On the base," the old man said. It wasn't a question.

"Yes."

"Sweet Jesus," Gesh said, swallowing hard. "I told him. Stupid bastard."

"What did you tell him?"

"To stay off there. That they'd kill him."

"Who would?"

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"The dead pilots, or whatever they are. The ghosts. They kill everything out there. All them planes, loaded with bombs. With death. Death is all they know. They killed themselves, now they kill everything else."

"I don't understand," I said.

"Maybe you can't," he said. "Do you know about ghosts?"

"I'm—not sure. I've never seen one."

"You won't see these either," the old man snorted. "They're dead. A long time ago. Fifteen, twenty years maybe. They died in the spring, in the rain. Now when it rains, they come back."

"Who comes back?" I asked.

"The dead flyers. The ones who died in the plane. Big one. I heard it fall in the night. Shook the ground. Thought it was the end of the damn world. I snuck over by the field, watched from the woods. There were a lotta bodies around, in them rubber bags, you know? Maybe a dozen. Maybe more. Nothing left of the damn plane. Junk. Pieces of it scattered half a mile. It was all gone the next day. The other airmen picked everything up, made it look like nothing happened. Like it had all been a dream. But it wasn't. I saw the dead men all right. And a few years later, their ghosts came back. They killed the dogs first, the ones that guarded the fence. Other animals too sometimes, coons, possums."

"Why do you think ghosts killed them?"

"Because they wasn't touched. No wounds, no blood. They just—take their souls. Leave the bodies behind. Dead all the same. Maybe the flyers weren't buried right. Maybe their souls are trapped out there and need food. I don't know. All I know is, they come back in the rain. And hunt."

"But Jerry Buck didn't just die. He was burned to death."

"Jerry was a man." Gesh shrugged. "Maybe he was harder to kill than the dogs."

"Maybe." I nodded, glancing around the hogan, inhaling the aroma of curing hides, and tobacco, and blood. A primeval scent that evoked a hazy memory of other lodges, in other places, long ago. Before I was born.

"Do you know what Jerry was doing out there?" I asked.

"Celebrating," the old man said. "Someone told him the air force is giving the base to the Ojibwa. Is that true?"

"Something like that," I said.

"But why? We don't have no planes."

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"We'll make something out of it," I said. "We're good at that. You said Jerry went there to celebrate?"

"Yeah. He wasn't from here, he was Lakota Sioux from Montana. Knew a dance he learned in reservation school. Buffalo dance. Did it pretty good too. Had a tape of the drums and everything. He said he was gonna dance out on the runway, put on a show for the people. Maybe make a few dollars."

"I see," I said. "Jesus. He, ahm, he had a gas can with him."

"Not gas, kerosene," Gesh said. "He needed a fire for the dance. Took my kerosene and wet down some rags so they'd burn in the rain. Musta screwed it up. He was drinkin'. He was always drinkin'. It's all the young people know these days."

"Not so many," I said. "Not anymore. Are you sure it was kerosene he took? Not gasoline?"

"I don't keep no gas here. Got no car or nothin'. Just use kerosene for the lamp, the stove."

"Yeah," I said. "Right. Look, there's going to be a ceremony at the base tomorrow. Would you like to come?"

"No," he spat. "No way. It's a bad place. Haunted. I won't go there."

"Suit yourself. Maybe I could come back here, sometime."

"Why?"

"To talk. I'll tell you how the Cree breed wolves. Maybe I'll even bring a couple beers."

The old man stared at me a long time, reading me. Then he shook his head. "I don't think so," he said quietly.

"No? Why not?"

"Because you ain't comin' back, Delacroix. I ain't stupid, just old. You don't believe me about them ghosts. I read it in your eyes. So you're gonna go see for yourself. Ain't you?"

I didn't want to lie to him. So I didn't answer.

"Thought so," he said, not bothering to conceal the contempt in his tone. "You got some education, I can tell by the way you talk. Jerry didn't know nothin'. Just a sidewalk Indian. But if you go out on that field, you'll be as dead as him. As dead as them dogs."

"I can take care of myself," I said. "I'll be back."

"No," he said. "You won't." And he turned his back on me, shutting me out. As though I were dead already.

"Took you long enough," Jenkins said as I climbed into the Jeep. "You find the shack?"

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"I found it. The old man said Buck took a can of kerosene to soak some rags and start a small fire out on the runway. He was going to put on a little show. To celebrate the tribe taking over the base."

"But something went wrong?" Jenkins asked, his tone neutral.

"He'd been drinking. My guess is, he spilled some of the kerosene on himself. And when he lit the fire . . . he burned."

"Yeah." Jenkins nodded warily. "That must've been how it happened. It wasn't suicide, then?"

"No. He didn't go out there to die. He went out there to dance."

"So we can go ahead with the transfer ceremony tomorrow?"

"I don't see why not. Do you?"

"No," Jenkins said, visibly relaxing. "What happened was a damn shame. But we have to move on."

"Yeah, I guess we do. The old man said something odd, though. He said the field's haunted. By the ghosts of flyers who cracked up a plane a long time ago. That the ghosts killed Jerry somehow. That they killed your dogs too."

"I told you he was crazy."

"Is he? If the dogs had been patrolling the perimeter, Buck never could have gotten on the field."

"Yeah, well, they weren't. We had no reason to think anyone would try to penetrate the field, so we shipped the dogs out. Transferred 'em back to Offutt. Wish to hell I'd gone with 'em."

"What about the plane? Was there a crash?"

"Bullock was a Strategic Air Command base," Jenkins said warily. "We flew nuclear missions out of here twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, for nearly thirty years. There was a cold war on, remember? Even if there were crackups, I couldn't tell you about 'em. It'd still be classified information. You were a soldier once. You know how it is, right?"

"Yes," I said. "I think so."

Jenkins dropped me off at my van and drove off to report to his colonel. I trotted to my Chevy through the rain and scrambled in. And started as a figure sat up in the back seat.

"Hi," Eva Redfern said. "Sorry. I wanted to make sure I didn't miss you. Must've fallen asleep. What did you find out?"

"That Jerry Buck's death was an accident," I said, starting the van. "Sort of."

"I don't understand."

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"Neither do I, exactly. Have you got time to take a short ride with me?"

"I suppose so. Where are we going?"

"To the dogs," I said. "Or to where they used to be."

The kennels had been removed, but the chain-link dog runs were still in place, probably more trouble than it was worth to tear down. The concrete runs had been swept clean. But I found what I was looking for in the grass that had grown up beneath the edge of the fence. A chalky white pebble, not much bigger than a marble. I bounced it in my palm a moment, thinking. Then carried it back to the van.

"Well?" Redfern said. "What did you find?"

"A lump of truth," I said, passing her the pebble. "You've got fingernails, see if you can dent that."

"I can . . . scrape it a little," she said, "but I can't dent it. What is it? Chalk?"

"Nope, it's crap. A dog turd, to be specific. Hard as rock. Calcified."

"What?"

"Don't worry, it won't contaminate you. It's old. Probably a dozen years or so. And it was the only one I could find."

"And is this thing—" she tossed the turd into my ashtray and dusted off her hands. "Is this supposed to mean something?"

"Maybe. It might mean that what old Joe Gesh told me about the dogs was true," I said, slipping the van into drive and heading out onto the tarmac. "That they were killed a long time ago. As near as I can tell, no dogs have used those kennels for years."

"But why should that matter?"

"I'm not sure it does, but it makes me wonder if the rest of what he told me is true. About dead flyers. And ghosts that kill in the rain."

"You're not making much sense."

"I'm about to make even less," I said, easing the van to a halt on the runway. "Look, I'm going out there to look around. I'll leave the headlights on, but since I may lose track of them in the rain, I want you to blow the horn in exactly ten minutes. And keep blowing it, once a minute for fifteen minutes or so. If I'm not back by then, go to the air-police barracks, find Sergeant Jenkins and tell him what happened. He'll know what to do. Understand?"

"No! I don't understand any of this."

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"Maybe there's nothing to understand," I said. "Maybe the old man really is crazy. It shouldn't take long to find out. One last thing. If I don't come back, whatever you do, *don't* come looking for me. I want your word on it."

"All right, I promise I won't look for you. But why?"

"Because if I'm not back in half an hour, you can offer tobacco to the spirits who haunt this place. I'll be one of them. The stupid one. The one who wouldn't listen to his elders."

I closed the van door on her objections, turned up the collar of Jenkins's raincoat, and trotted off into the rainy dark. I tried to move in a straight line, keeping the headlights directly behind me, but it was impossible. The third time I glanced over my shoulder to get a fix on the van, I couldn't see the lights anymore.

I chose to follow a seam in the concrete instead, hoping it would keep me moving in a more-or-less straight line down the tarmac, away from the van. I didn't meet any ghosts. At least, not at first. There was only the solitary slap of my boots in the puddles, as I trotted along in the sickly glow of the flashlight.

Big airfields have their own special reek, *eau de* exhaust fumes, scorched rubber from rough landings, the acrid stink of wing and windshield de-icer and fuel spills. The stench was strong at first, but seemed to fade as I jogged on. Bullock hadn't been used much for a while, perhaps the rain was rinsing the perfume away. Just as well.

It didn't sound like an airfield either. They're never silent. Always there's the scream of jets, taking off, landing, or just warming up, mingling with the constant rumble of support vehicles. Here there was nothing. Just the whisper of the drizzle. And the occasional whistle of the wind in the wire of the perimeter fencing.

It seemed oddly peaceful, running along in a halo of light, alone, hidden from the world of men by the gunmetal curtain of the rain. No ghosts, no dead dogs, nothing to see. . . . I checked my watch to see how long I'd been running, but the dial was wet and blurry and I couldn't quite make it out.

And then I fell. Hard. I tucked and rolled instinctively, skidding along in the water like an otter on a slide. The flashlight clattered away from me in the dark.

I lay there a few minutes, dazed, trying to catch my breath, gather my wits. God, I was tired, exhausted, heart pounding, head splitting. If I could just rest a bit. . . .

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Sweet Jesus. The dogs. They'd died out here. In the rain. Just like this. I forced myself to my hands and knees and crawled toward the faint glow of the flashlight. It was lying beside a puddle, its light diffused, scattered into swirling rainbow bands, by the water, and the nearly invisible turquoise liquid floating on it. I tried to sniff it, but couldn't get a sense of what it was. And realized I couldn't smell anything at all, not the water or the wind. Nothing. And then I recognized the floating slick. Knew it for what it was. It was Death. In the rain. For the guard dogs. And Jerry Buck. And now for me.

I picked up the flashlight, but it was oily, slippery, and I fumbled it away, watched frozen with horror as it tumbled slow-motion down on the tarmac. And winked out.

I turned slowly in a circle, knuckling the rain out of my eyes, trying to get a sense of where I was. It was hopeless. I could only see a few feet. It didn't matter. I had to move, to get away, so I started walking, dazed and aching, stumbling along like a wino, lost in the belly of the beast.

I don't know how long I walked. Years. Then off to the left, I caught a glimpse of a monstrous shape. A ghostly aircraft? It wasn't real. Couldn't be. So I ignored it, and stumbled on. But then I saw a second silhouette, as huge as the first.

I turned and reeled toward them. And found the fence. And the trucks. Toxic-waste tankers, a line of them, a few yards beyond the fence. Waiting their turn at the incinerator. They seemed ugly and misshapen in the rain, foam streaming down their sides like lather, sizzling as the rain reacted to the specks of toxic sludge spatters.

I peered blearily through the fence for a night watchman, anyone. But there was no light, and the exit gate was locked. The tankers might as well have been on the moon. In the shape I was in, there was no way I could climb a fifteen-foot fence and fight through the bayonet wire. And if I got hung up there, I'd die as surely . . .

I heard a groan. A low moan from behind me. I turned, trying to place it . . . And realized what it was. The horn. Redfern had started blowing the horn.

And without thinking, I started running toward it, shambling across the tarmac, a puppet without strings. Veering, stumbling, called on by the horn. And each time it was a little closer. Fifteen. She would blow it once a minute for fifteen minutes. How many had I heard? I couldn't remember. I only knew that to stop running was to die. Like the dogs.

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I saw the van. Spotted the faint halo of the headlights ahead, off to the right. I swerved toward them. And fell, tumbling along on the concrete runway, knocking what breath I had out of me. And then Redfern was there, helping me crawl.

I couldn't make it through the van door. I vomited, head down, still on my hands and knees in the rain. I retched and spewed until there was nothing left to give, and then I lost that too.

But it helped. And the drive back toward the gate helped more. I hung my head out the window, drinking the nightwind and the rain, purging my lungs, and my soul.

"Do you have a car here?" I asked. It was the first thing I'd said since she found me.

"We'll leave it. You're going to the hospital in Crater Creek."

"No," I said, coughing. "I can't. If I go there we'll lose everything. And we've already paid too much. Jerry Buck paid for it. We can't back off now. Just stop at your car."

"No. I'm staying with you."

"You can't. There are arrangements you have to make for tomorrow. I want you to talk to Dr. Klein. He'll help us, I think."

"Klein? Why should he help?"

"Because at heart, he's basically a decent man," I said, managing a weak smile. "But more important, he has a . . . warped sense of humor."

"What are you talking about?"

So I told her, and she said I was crazy. And she was right and I knew it. But I was so coldly enraged that I didn't care. I asked for her promise. And she gave it. Probably just to humor me. But she gave it. And that was enough.

"If you won't go to the hospital, at least come home with me," she said. "You can't stay here."

"I'll be all right. I'll rest. But I have one last bit of business to take care of first."

"This time of night? What kind of business?"

"Private," I said. "And personal. Very personal."

In the end she left me alone. She didn't like it, but she did. And I was sorry she did. I was sick and miserable and exhausted, and the only thing that kept me going was the thought that if I stopped for even a moment, I wouldn't get up for a week.

That, and the anger, of course. It was like a fire in my belly, a cold blaze of killing rage. For what had been done to Jerry Buck,

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and to me. And what they were trying to do to my people.

So I sat in my van, with the windows open, and the radio on, and waited. And thought. And I must have dozed off. Because the next thing I knew there was a wan hint of grey light on the horizon and the deejay was babbling about breakfast. I checked my watch. A little after four A.M. Time enough.

I fired up the van and drove over to the air-police barracks. There was a light in the day room. No others. I unlocked the van's glove compartment and took out my revolver, a Smith and Wesson .38. I checked it, and slipped it into my waistband.

I'd hoped they were too shorthanded to post a guard, and there was none. I just walked in. The day room was immaculate, tiled floors gleaming, every magazine aligned. Something clicked in the corner, and I realized the large coffee urn had switched itself on automatically. They'd be up and about soon.

His room was easy to find. It was the largest, and his name was on the door. Chief Master Sergeant Purvis L. Jenkins.

It wasn't locked. I eased the door open, stepped in, and closed it behind me. I waited a moment for my eyes to adjust to the dimness, until I could make out his form on the bed. He was lying on his back, snoring softly, his fingers laced behind his head. I peeled off his sodden raincoat and draped it over him. Then I drew my weapon and switched on the lights.

He blinked instantly awake and alert. I was impressed. He glanced at me, and the gun, and the raincoat. And his eyes widened a fraction. But he didn't flinch.

"Shit," he said softly. "You went out there, didn't you?"

"That's right. I nearly died. Suffocated. Like the dogs."

"What, ahm, what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to ask you some questions. And you're gonna tell me the truth. Because if I even *think* you're lying to me, I'm going to fire this weapon in your general direction. I won't even have to hit you. And your raincoat will explode, and you'll burn. Just like Jerry Buck. Do you understand?"

He nodded, swallowing.

"The plane the old man told me about, the one that crashed. What was it?"

"Look, for God's sake—"

I eased back the hammer of the .38. He read my eyes, and saw his own death there. "It was a tanker," he said, grudgingly, as though each word was an agony. "A KC 135 Stratotanker."

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"My God," I said softly. "And it crashed on takeoff?"

"Right. Spilled its whole payload. Nearly twenty thousand gallons of jet fuel. Just dumb luck it didn't explode on impact. But it was raining, and—it didn't."

"Why didn't you recover it?"

"Because by morning, most of it was gone," he said simply. "Drained away, soaked into the gravel bed under the runway. It's low land at that end of the field, next to the marsh. There was no way to recover it short of tearing up the whole damn field, and we couldn't do that. Hell, there was a war on and we had to keep B-52s in the air twenty-four hours a day. Anyway, it was gone. So we went on flying missions, and figured we'd got off lucky. Until it showed up again three years later. And the guard dogs all died."

"In the spring," I said. "In the rain. From the fumes. Gasoline, not kerosene. Buck might have burned himself with kerosene, but it wouldn't have exploded the way it did."

"That's right. Basic physics, jet fuel's almost two pounds a gallon lighter than water, so when the water table rises high enough, we get seepage onto the field. More this year than most. Usually we don't get much, and not for long."

"It was long enough for Jerry Buck," I said. "It was forever."

"Yeah." He nodded. "Look, I'm—"

"Don't!" I snapped, cutting him off. "If you say you're sorry, I swear to God I'll blow you away just for the hell of it. Now, maybe you couldn't clean up the fuel while the base was operational, but it's closing. Why not do it now?"

"Budget," he said bitterly. "With peace breakin' out, they've cut us to the bone. We've barely got money enough to keep a third of our force active. It'd cost millions to tear up the field to clean up the spill. We just don't have it anymore."

"But why us? Why dump it on the Ojibwa?"

"Two reasons. One, because you're broke, and wouldn't have the money to develop the field. We figured you'd open a gift shop or a bingo hall and that'd be it. You'd probably never come across the spill at all. And if you ever did, you likely wouldn't report it and risk losing the land."

"I see. And where does Kanelos fit in?"

"He's a front. If we'd just ceded the base to you, you might've had it inspected. This way it's maybe not the nicest deal in the world, but at least everybody gets something out of it."

"Everybody but Jerry Buck."

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"That was an accident. He shouldn't have been out there."

"Maybe he wouldn't have been, if the area was posted as hazardous. And he sure as hell wouldn't have started that fire. Would he?"

"No, I suppose not. What are you going to do?"

"What I have to. Take the deal. Maybe it's a bad deal, but my people have never gotten any other kind. And as you said, at least there's something for everybody. Even for us."

"Good." He nodded. "You're doing the right thing. I'm sorry—"

I pulled the trigger. A reflex. The hammer clicked on an empty cylinder. Jenkins winced, then his eyes narrowed. "You bastard!"

"Easy," I said. "Maybe I just forgot to load one cylinder. Thanks for your—cooperation, Sergeant."

"Look, please try to understand. I was just doing my damn job. Trying to protect my own people."

"Your people?"

"The air force. It's the only family I've ever had. But for what it's worth, I really am sorry. About Buck. And the rest of it."

"I think you know what that's worth," I said.

"Yeah," he said, "I guess I do."

The rain paused briefly at first light, just long enough to reveal a pallid sun, bled white by the storm. But then the sky darkened and the torrent resumed with a vengeance, an icy, wind-driven drizzle, the kind you only see in northern Michigan, or Seattle, or Nome.

Jenkins had told the colonel about my visit. I could tell by the wariness in his eyes as he greeted Eva Redfern and me at the reception center. None of us spoke of it, still the tension was there, like a fuse smoldering just below the surface. An explosion only a word away.

The gathering was almost a repeat of the day before, reporters, a few cameramen, and a gaggle of local politicians. But there were no hors d'oeuvres, no air of gaiety. It was less a celebration than a wake. A vigil for a sidewalk Indian who'd traded the poverty of the reservation for an ugly death, far from his home and his people. A wake for Jerry Buck.

Another difference was the presence of Dr. Klein and a half dozen of his neo-hippie students. I'd thought Colonel Webber might object when they arrived, but I made it clear they were the honored guests of the Ojibwa Nation. Klein and his raggedy clan of peaceniks had protested the presence of nuclear death on this land for years. They'd been ridiculed, harassed, and arrested. Right or wrong, they'd paid

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their dues, they'd earned admission to this last matinee.

Jenkins surprised me by greeting Klein warmly, and openly. Shaking his hand. Webber's mouth soured in disapproval, but Jenkins's action seemed to defuse some of the tension in the room. If there was going to be trouble, it would have been between these two old adversaries. But there was no animosity left between them. They were like two fighters who go the distance, savaging each other until the final bell, and then embrace. Gladiators, with more spiritual kinship to each other than to those who never bled, no matter what their politics.

The actual transfer was almost an anticlimax. Colonel Webber made a brief speech of welcome, then introduced Mr. Kanelos and his attorneys, Eva Redfern, and me. He then transferred title to the property formerly known as Bullock Air Force Base, Strategic Air Command, to Mr. Frantzis Kanelos, head of Kanelos Waste Disposal. Kanelos in turn transferred the title to the legal representatives of the Ojibwa Nation in exchange for a permanent lease of the waste incinerator and four hundred acres of land adjacent to it. I'd suggested Redfern change the wording of his lease to read: for as long as the sun shall rise, but she said sarcasm had no place in a legal document.

And she was right. The stakes were too high. Native Americans have been swept into the corners of our continent by a tidal wave of history. Our past is over, we can only press on, and struggle to survive in the present. And sometimes that means eating the dirt of injustice and making the best of it.

But not always.

Kanelos signed the final documents with a grin and a flourish, to a smattering of polite applause. And I met Redfern's eyes and they were brimming, with joy or pain, I couldn't tell. Both, perhaps. But there was steel in her glance too. The land was ours again. We had a done deal.

"Ladies and gentlemen," I said, raising my voice, "on behalf of the Ojibwa Nation and its ruling council, I thank you for coming to witness this historic event. But as all of you know, the proceedings were marred by a tragedy, the—accidental death of Geronimo Gall Cobmoosa, known to us as Jerry Buck. To honor Jerry's memory, and to exemplify the brotherhood that now exists between us, we would like to invite Mr. Kanelos to lead a candlelight procession to lay a wreath where Jerry Buck died. Doctor Klein will pass out candles and umbrellas at the door—"

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"Wait a minute," Kanelos said, glancing at Webber, "you mean go out there on the runway now? With candles?"

"What's a little rain?" I said. "With a prosperous future—"

"Forget it, Frank," Webber broke in. "Jenkins told me Delacroix was out on the runway last night, damn near got himself killed. This is just his idea of a little joke. He knows it's not safe out there."

"It's not a joke," I said. "It was a fishing expedition. I needed to be sure Mr. Kanelos knew about the fuel spill."

"Even if I did, it won't make any difference to our agreement," Kanelos said uneasily. "My lawyers—"

"Assured you it's rock solid," I finished for him. "I certainly hope so. In any case, since it *is* a little damp for a candlelight procession, we've arranged alternate entertainment. Ladies and gentlemen, please step to the observation window to view a small display . . ."

Far down the perimeter road, there was a blast of white smoke, and three solitary shafts of light flashed into the gunmetal overcast above the runway. And burst into red flowers of flame, sputtering gamely in the darkness. Candles in the rain.

". . . of fireworks," I finished.

"What?" Webber said, his face going grey. "You can't—"

But it was too late. In slow motion, the flares continued their arc across the sky, and began to fall, raining petals of fire down on the tarmac. There was a deep *chuff,* like a sharp intake of breath, and the runway burst into flame, in scattered spots at first, but quickly dancing across the surface of the water, until the fires united in an inferno a half mile across, howling into the sky as though the gates of hell had opened.

I moved quietly back and stepped out onto the portico, joining Redfern and Dr. Klein at the railing. Reporters and cameramen streamed past us, drawn like moths to the flames. A few minutes later Jenkins sauntered out and stood behind Dr. Klein. Jenkins's face was a carved, ebon mask. I could read nothing in it.

"Quite a bonfire," he said at last.

"Not so bad," Klein said. "Compared to Kuwait, this one's a marshmallow roast. By my calculations, it should burn between five and six hours, depending on how much fuel has evaporated over the years. And that will be the end of it."

"And of the runway, and the incinerator," Jenkins said. "Ain't you worried Kanelos will sue your tails off?"

"I hope he tries," Redfern said grimly. "I'd love to take his deposition under oath, about what he knew and when, about the fire hazard that killed Jerry Buck."

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"Good point," Jenkins conceded. "Doubt the government will bother you either. Might try though. The colonel's in there ravin' about sabotage. Ordered me to arrest all three of you, in fact."

"So?" I said. "Are we under arrest?"

"Hell no," Jenkins said wryly. "It just shows how shaky his grip on reality is. We've got no authority to arrest anybody. This isn't a military base anymore. Won't even look much like one in a few hours. Won't be anything left of that runway but gravel and ash. A couple years, you won't even be able to tell it was there."

"There'll always be traces of it," Klein said. "When you cauterize the earth, it leaves scars. I wonder what archaeologists will make of them a thousand years from now?"

"Maybe if we're real lucky, Doc," Jenkins said quietly, "they'll look around and scratch their heads. And won't even be able to guess what it was used for."

Out on the perimeter of the field, the blaze was already burning low, the concrete sizzling and cracking in the drizzle. But on the tarmac near the spot where Jerry Buck died, the inferno still raged on, furiously roiling plumes of oily smoke into the sky. The flames leapt and twisted and writhed, like a ring of ghostly dancers, carrying candles in the rain.

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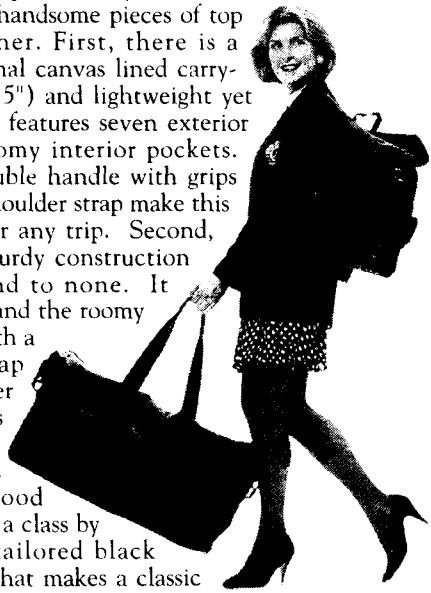

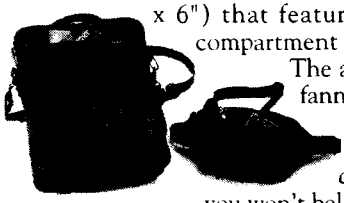

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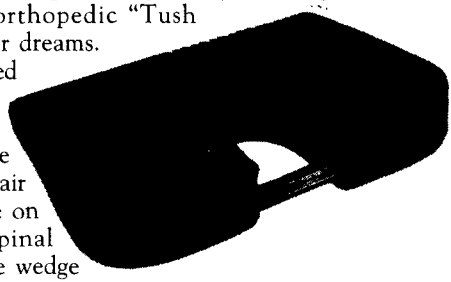

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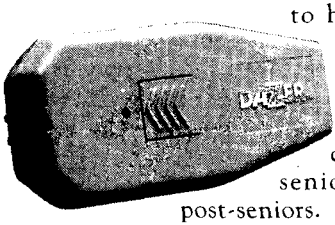

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Elizabeth Ferrars has written more than sixty works of mystery and suspense, including most recently Sleep of the Unjust *and* Smoke Without Fire *(Doubleday Perfect Crime). Yet she never loses the capacity to surprise, for she is a master at revealing a darker aspect to a likable character . . .*

STOP THIEF!

by ELIZABETH FERRARS

Roger Gates put the mowing machine away in the garden shed. Coming out of the shed and closing its door, he stood still for a moment, drawing in one or two deep breaths. The air was full of the scent of new-mown grass, the most exquisite scent, he thought, in the world. Today had been the first time that he had mown the grass since the winter. For the last three months he had occasionally managed to find a little work to do in the garden, but this Saturday morning had been the first time since the end of November that he had been able to spend some hours exerting himself fully, surrounded on all sides by the lovely beginnings of springtime.

The forsythia was a burst of yellow at the bottom of the garden. The early clematis, hanging in great clumps on the wooden fence that surrounded the garden, was a glory of tender pink. The daffodils that crowded thickly in the beds that bordered the neat lawn that he had just finished mowing were at their best. The aubrieta in thick cushions of purple brightened the rockery. Even the pasque-flowers were in the midst of their brief flowering. After the meagre patches of colour given to the garden during the winter by the yellow jasmine and the winter-flowering cherry, there was a wealth of it that filled Roger with deep content. There had never been anything

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imaginative in the design of the garden, but simply a richness of blossoming, especially in this lovely month.

Going to the back door of the house, through which he always came out into the garden, he pushed it open, stepped inside, and climbed out of the wellingtons that he had been wearing. His slippers were there where he had left them when he went out, beside the doormat. He put them on and was just about to go to the sink to wash his hands when an extraordinary thing struck him. On the table was a packet of cigarettes.

His wife, Coralie, had never smoked and he himself had not smoked for ten years.

He looked at the packet with a puzzled frown, wondering how it could have got where it was. Then a possible explanation struck him and when he had washed his hands he walked along the passage to the living room, where, as he had expected, he found Coralie and said cheerfully, "Hallo, have we had a visitor?"

But Coralie was not quite in the state that he had expected. He had thought that he would find her sitting by the fire with sherry and glasses on a tray by her side, waiting for him. But although she was sitting by the fire, there was no sherry there and she did not look around at him when he came in. Instead she simply stared with a curious blankness into the fire. Also she was wearing her overcoat and her fur-lined boots, as if she had only just got in from her visit to the village shop. But he knew that she had set out even before he had started out into the garden, and that had been over two hours ago. The only explanation that he could think of was that she had stopped in some neighbour's house for a coffee and had only just got home. But that did not explain why she had brought cigarettes back with her.

Coralie was forty, three years younger than he was himself. She was a slender, delicate-looking woman, with smooth fair hair that she wore brushed straight back from her face and coiled into a loose knot on her neck. Her face was oval, still pale from a recent illness, with grey eyes fringed with long lashes, and to Roger she was as beautiful as when he had first met her. That had been six years ago. They had got married only three months after that meeting and together had chosen this house in the village of Lexlade, which was three miles from the town of Allingford, where Roger had recently been appointed manager in the bank in different branches of which, in different parts of the country, he had spent all his working life. It had been a deep satisfaction to him to arrive in Allingford, for it

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had been a return to where life had begun for him. He had been born there, had been educated in its comprehensive, and had had his first very junior job there.

Coralie was a Londoner and still liked to spend an occasional day in London, having lunch with some old friend and doing a little shopping, but like him, she had fallen in love with the charming house in the village and had entered with enthusiasm into village activities. Not that she had been able to take much part in them for the last two months, for she had had a difficult time recovering from her illness. It was taking much longer than anyone had anticipated. But of course at forty it was not to be expected that she would recover like a young woman from the danger and tragedy of a very painful miscarriage.

He repeated what he had said as he came into the room. "Have we had a visitor?"

She turned her head to look at him with a vagueness that he was startled to find a little frightening.

"Not that I know of," she said.

"No one's been in to see us this morning?" he asked.

"Not unless it was while I was out shopping. Why?"

"Ah, perhaps that's what it was. You were out shopping and I was in the garden and . . ." But it did not feel right. "It's just those cigarettes on the kitchen table. I wondered how they got there."

"Oh." There was concentration in her great eyes, the vagueness had gone. "Yes, of course you saw them."

"Well, how did they get there? I mean, did someone leave them, or did you get them for someone, or what?"

"I don't know," she said, "I—I found them."

"Found them in the kitchen?"

"No, in my pocket. My coat pocket." She patted the pocket of the coat that she was still wearing. "In here."

"But when?" He was bewildered.

"After I came out of the shop. I put my hand in my pocket to get my handkerchief and there they were."

"I don't understand," he said. "How did they get there?"

"I don't know." Her voice was dull, as if she was not much interested. She stood up. "I'll get the sherry."

"Just a minute," he said. "You don't mean you think someone slipped them into your pocket as a kind of trick?"

"There was no one else in the shop. No, of course I took them myself, but I don't know why."

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She left the room and after a few minutes returned without her overcoat and having changed from her boots into slippers, and carrying a tray with the sherry and glasses on it.

In a strange way it disturbed Roger more that she looked entirely her normal self than it would have if she had shown some sign of mental disturbance, for while she had been out of the room he had been trying to make himself face the fact that the aftermath of that miscarriage might perhaps be a breakdown of some kind. Once or twice during the last few weeks he had feared it, but her occasional fits of strangeness had always passed off quite quickly and he had hoped that they were at an end.

She poured out the sherry, sank back in her chair by the fire, and smiled.

"Did you have a nice morning in the garden?" she asked.

"Yes, yes, but did you pay for them, Coralie? The cigarettes."

"How could I when I didn't know I had them?" She laughed. "Anyhow, one packet of cigarettes, they won't miss them."

He sat down in the chair facing hers across the fireplace, sipped his sherry and fell silent.

Next morning she would not go to church with him. She said that she had slept very badly and had a headache, but when he suggested that he should stay at home with her she was very insistent that he should go as usual. When the service was over the vicar, who stood outside the doorway chatting to his parishioners as they left, asked him if Mrs. Gates was not well. All Lexlade knew of her illness, just as they had known before it of the somewhat surprising fact that in her middle age she had become pregnant.

"Thank you," Roger said. "Not too grand, as a matter of fact. But she just needs a bit of rest. It's nothing to worry about."

"And that job in London," the vicar said. "Have you made up your mind about it? Are you leaving us?"

"Good Lord, no. Not for anything." The news that Roger had been offered an appointment as manager of a bank in Battersea had somehow spread through the village, though he had hardly given it a thought. Of course it would have meant a promotion and a higher salary, though the advantages of that might have been cancelled by the increased cost of living in London. But it would also have meant leaving the small community in which he had lived very happily for these last few years, and the garden that now was really repaying all the hard work that he had put into it. But it had to be admitted that the way that the rumour had spread was his own fault. He had

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boasted about the offer to one or two people over drinks in the Red Lion. Perhaps, though he could not remember doing so, he had spoken about it to the vicar himself.

"Well, I'm delighted to hear it," the vicar said. "You'd have been sorely missed here. And please give my best wishes to Mrs. Gates."

Roger went on through the old churchyard to the gateway and across the village green to his home. As he went he wondered what Coralie had done with the packet of cigarettes and on an impulse, before going into the house, he looked into the dustbin that stood beside the back door. The packet was there, which on the whole relieved him.

It was two days later that the second packet of cigarettes appeared.

Like the one before, he found it on the kitchen table when he returned in the evening from the bank in Allingford. He had just put the car away in the garage and taken a short stroll round the garden, enjoying the wonderful softly scented sense of returning life around him, then he went into the house, as usual when he had been in the garden by the back door, and saw the cigarettes on the table before him.

A different brand this time, he thought. Not that he was up to date about such things nowadays, but the packet looked different. He suddenly became aware of a faintly sick feeling. He might have put the thing in the dustbin straightaway, but found that he felt an extraordinary reluctance to touch it. He felt a similar reluctance to talk about it when he went into the sitting room and found Coralie in her usual chair, quietly knitting. She had always done a good deal of knitting and was very skilled at it, a result of which was an accumulation of jerseys and cardigans, some of them for him, in the chest of drawers in their bedroom.

She looked up at him and smiled and said, "Had a good day?"

It was all so normal that it seemed silly to be bothering about a packet of cigarettes. All the same, when he had kissed her and sat down, he said, "Taking up smoking?"

She looked puzzled. "Smoking?"

"Yes," he said, "I see you've been buying cigarettes again."

"Oh," she said, "those."

"Well," he said, "if you really want to smoke, why don't you?"

"I don't," she said. "I thought I'd give them to Mrs. Banks."

Mrs. Banks was their daily help. She came in to clean the house on five mornings a week and enjoyed a cup of tea and a cigarette

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halfway through her three hours' work. She was also responsible, to some extent, for spreading the news of such things as Coralie's pregnancy and later miscarriage throughout the village. She was a very efficient and friendly woman and Coralie claimed that she was entirely dependent on her.

"I thought you didn't much like her smoking in the kitchen," Roger said. "Didn't you try to get her to eat a biscuit instead?"

"You can't change people."

"Well, it's a change in you, actually buying her cigarettes for her." He hesitated. "You did buy them, I suppose? I mean, it wasn't like last time, you didn't just find them in your pocket?"

"I think I found them in my basket. Yes, I'm sure I did. It doesn't matter, does it?"

"No, but you did pay for them, didn't you?"

"I think so. I expect I did."

"Surely you know."

She gave an irritated frown. "How can one be sure when they rattle all the prices off on that computer thing? One can't think of everything."

"Coralie, I don't believe you did pay for them. Darling, please be honest with me. Didn't you just help yourself to them for some—oh, some very peculiar sort of reason, but one we ought to talk about? I only want to help."

She stood up, dropped her knitting into the basket on the floor at her side, and walked out of the room.

He could hear that she went into the kitchen and set about preparing their evening meal. Presently, as usual, she came in with the sherry, then dished up the veal casserole that she had cooked earlier and a chocolate mousse. Her cooking was as good as ever, but she was very silent and would not meet his eyes. Afterwards, when she had set the dishwasher going, she switched on the television without asking him if the programme was one that he wanted to watch, which as it happened it was not, and then sat in front of it for the rest of the evening. She went early to bed. Before following her, Roger went out to the kitchen and saw that the cigarettes had vanished. Like the first packet, he found them in the dustbin.

Next morning, on his way into Allingford, he called in at the village shop, which he was able to do because it opened half an hour before he was due at the bank. It was run by a middle-aged couple called McQueen, who in spite of their name had never been in Scotland, yet took a certain pride in their remote Scottish ancestry. Bob

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McQueen did the ordering for the shop, saw to the two local weekly deliveries, and looked after the accounts. Katie, his wife, ran the shop, which was a well-organized self-service place, answered the telephone, took orders, and got to know the customers.

The shop was almost empty when Roger entered it. One woman, whom he knew by sight though he could not remember her name, was studying the shelf of canned soups. He and she said good morning to one another, though he doubted if she knew who he was any more than he knew her. As he approached Katie McQueen, who was seated at the counter that had the computer on it, she looked up at him with what he thought was a trace of anxiety in her smile. He did not often appear in the shop.

"Good morning, Mrs. McQueen," he said. "How are you?"

"Very well thank you, Mr. Gates," she answered. "And how are you?"

"Fine, fine," he said. "I just called in because my wife thinks she didn't pay for some cigarettes she got here yesterday. She may be *mistaken, but she wanted me to make sure of it.*"

Katie McQueen's smile brightened and the anxiety faded from it.

"That's very thoughtful of her," she said. "Yes, I thought there was a bit of a mixup about that, though I didn't really like to say anything about it. It would have been so embarrassing if I was wrong. Or if I was right, come to think of it. But thank you for settling the matter. How is she now?"

She was certainly one of the people who knew of the miscarriage.

"Oh, getting along pretty well, thank you," he said. "Gets tired pretty quickly still, but that's only to be expected."

"That's right. My first was a miscarriage, you know, and it nearly broke my heart. I got sort of muddled and confused after it, I remember. It was very hard for Bob. But then Ian came along and everything went all right."

In fact the McQueens had had four children after the first failure. The eldest was at Bristol University, studying law, the second was apprenticed to a builder in Allingford, and the next two went on the school bus into Allingford every morning to the comprehensive. But the McQueens had married young. There would be no Ian for Coralie.

Roger paid what she owed for the cigarettes and went on to the bank.

When he returned home that evening he did not go straight into the house, but lingered for a little while in the garden, pulling out

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a weed here and there and noticing how swiftly the grass on the strip of lawn seemed to be growing now and that it would be able to do with another cut at the weekend. Then, with a slight sigh, he entered the house by the kitchen door.

There were no cigarettes on the table today, but there was a tin of baby food.

A feeling of painful pity flooded him. In his insensitive way, he thought, he had not understood how much the loss of her child had meant to Coralie. He had not troubled to understand.

When he went into the sitting room and found her in her usual chair, knitting, and she asked him cheerfully if he had had a good day, he nodded his head and kissed her on the cheek and said nothing about the baby food. But he had a feeling that she found something unsatisfactory in this. Could it be, he wondered, that she had wanted to be scolded for having done something so foolish as buying it, or bringing it home, that was to say, perhaps without having paid for it. The tin was only little and would easily have slipped unnoticed into her coat pocket.

But that was something that he could not allow, even if he said nothing to Coralie about it. He could not let it be said that his wife was shoplifting. He would have to make some arrangement with Mrs. McQueen.

Next morning, as he had the day before, he went into the shop on his way into Allingford. The same other customer who had been there yesterday was there. Someone, he supposed, who did her shopping early before going on to her work, whatever it was. But this morning she smiled at him and said, "Good morning, Mr. Gates, I hope your doing her shopping for Mrs. Gates doesn't mean she's had a relapse."

He wished that he could remember her name. He was fairly sure that they had met at some village function. He also wished very much that she was not there. It would have made it easier to talk to Mrs. McQueen.

But Mrs. McQueen took the initiative. Looking sympathetic, she said, "I know why you're here, Mr. Gates, and of course you're right, we'll have to do something about it, we can't just let it go on, can we? I don't mean I don't understand and I'll do anything I can to help, but I actually saw her do it, you know. Just slipped the thing into her pocket as if she didn't mind if I saw her or not. And then when I spoke to her about it and suggested quite pleasantly she'd forgotten to pay and wouldn't it be best if she did, she just looked

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kind of puzzled and said she didn't know what I was talking about. And not wanting a scene with other customers in the shop, I didn't argue but let her get away with it. But I can't just let it go on, now can I?"

The other customer had moved up close to the desk and was waiting to pay for her own purchases.

"No, no, of course not," Roger said, "and I think you've been very kind so far, and of course I'm going to discuss it with her, but meantime if you'd just keep a note of what we owe you and let me settle up when I come in, I'm sure that'll be the best thing to do."

He hoped that that was not so explicit that the other customer could be sure of what he was talking about.

"That'll be quite all right, and I hate to worry you about it," Mrs. McQueen said, "but if I were you I'd talk it over with the doctor. Do you have Dr. Bayliss? He's ever so understanding. Thanks—" This was as Roger handed her a five-pound note and she pounded the amount on her computer and gave him the change. "Good morning, Liz dear."

This was to the woman standing behind him, Liz Linklater. He suddenly remembered her name and who she was. He remembered her perfectly now. She ran a small hairdressing salon in the village to which Coralie went about once a fortnight and where, she said, more local gossip was to be heard in the hour or so that she spent there than anywhere else. Roger had met the woman at a fête that was held every year in the summer, where she had been in charge of one of the stalls. Saying a sheepish good morning to her, he hurried out of the shop, thinking, however, that Mrs. McQueen had given him good advice. He would talk the situation over with Matthew Bayliss, who was quite a good friend of his.

He telephoned him soon after reaching his office and they arranged to have lunch together in the small Indian restaurant that was almost opposite the bank. Matthew Bayliss was a member of a group practice in Allingford, but he lived in Lexlade and twice a week held a surgery there. It was one of his Lexlade mornings and Roger had had to telephone him at the village hall, part of which was given over to him. They met and ordered their curry and beer and made a few remarks about the pleasant spring weather, in spite of which, according to Bayliss, flu was raging in the neighbourhood. Then Roger, dropping his voice as if he were afraid that someone might be spying on them, said that he hoped what he had to say would go no further, though he shouldn't have said that, because of

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course he knew that Bayliss would treat it as entirely confidential.

"Naturally," the doctor said, "but I think I can tell you what you're going to say to me."

"It's about Coralie—"

"And her shoplifting, isn't it? Physically she's pretty well, it seems to me, but I realise how this other thing must be worrying you."

Roger stared at him, shocked.

"But how have you heard about it? It isn't common knowledge, is it?"

"Rapidly becoming so, I'm afraid. I've just been to the Old Parsonage, and it also happens to be Liz Linklater's day for the place, and she seems to have picked up the story somehow."

The Old Parsonage was an old people's home in Lexlade where Matthew Bayliss attended after his morning surgery in the village and where Liz Linklater visited once a week to wash and set the old women's hair and cut the old men's. She brought them what news she could and enjoyed a good gossip as much as they did.

"I understand," Roger said sadly. "She was in the shop when I was there trying to sort things out with Mrs. McQueen so that there'd be as little scandal as possible. She's been very decent about it. She's just going to let me know what Coralie owes her and not risk making a scene in the shop. And it was her idea that I should talk to you. Can you help me at all, Matthew? Can you give me any advice?"

"What's Coralie actually taken so far, that you know of?" Bayliss asked.

"Two packets of cigarettes and a tin of baby food."

"Hm, not very much. Not very ambitious. But if she thinks she's got away with it, it might get worse. The odd box of chocolates, the bottle of wine hidden under a newspaper in her basket. And after that, who knows? I don't want to depress you unnecessarily, but if I were you I'd have it out with her. It's an obvious aftereffect of the miscarriage, which at her age was a very serious matter. In its way it isn't surprising, in fact I feel we ought almost to have expected something of the sort. The main thing is she shouldn't feel you've turned against her because of it. If you like I could fix up for her to see a psychiatrist. There's a quite good man at the infirmary. But I don't really recommend it at this stage. He won't be able to help her much until she wants to be helped. That may come, and then he might come in useful. Meantime it seems to me you've done the best

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you could already, I mean settling it with Mrs. McQueen. That's quite important."

"But because of that bloody Linklater woman, it's still going to get all round the village."

"I shouldn't worry about that too much. People understand these things a lot better than they used to. You'll find they're more sympathetic than you expect."

"I don't want sympathy! I want Coralie as she used to be."

A faintly sceptical look appeared on the doctor's face, almost as if he thought that perhaps Roger had never really known what Coralie used to be, but the look was gone in an instant.

"Anyway, you aren't thinking of moving, are you?" he said. "You've dropped that idea."

"Yes, I never thought of it very seriously," Roger said. "And I imagine it's pretty important now that we should have peace and quiet."

He was in need of peace and quiet himself, he thought, after all the anxieties of the last few weeks, which might not have affected him as deeply as they had Coralie, but still had made heavy demands on him, and when he arrived home that evening he was in a tense and nervous state. But at least there was no sign that Coralie had acquired anything from the shop but her normal purchases and they had a peaceful time together. But he took a swift look in the dustbin and saw the tin of baby food was there. The dustmen having been round that morning, the two packets of cigarettes had gone, and besides the tin there was nothing in the bin but some potato peelings.

They had sherry before their meal and Roger told himself that he ought to make some attempt to discuss the matter that had been on his mind all day, but Coralie seemed to be in such a placid mood and the steak and kidney pie that she had cooked was so particularly good that it seemed a pity to risk destroying the pleasantness of the evening. They made love that night for the first time since she had returned from the hospital. One of the aftereffects of her miscarriage had been a withdrawal from sex. But that night she was loving and tender, though near the end she murmured in his ear, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry." But whether she was sorry because she had disgraced herself in public, or because she had failed to bear his child, he could not be sure.

Whatever she had meant, he went off to Allingford in a better mood next morning than for the last few days. He felt that there

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was no need to call in at the shop and once in his office devoted himself to his work with more concentration than he had managed to achieve since the weekend. It was nearly twelve o'clock before his secretary came in to tell him that Mrs. Gates was there with a gentleman and wanted to see him.

Puzzled, because she hardly ever came to the bank, he came out of his office to greet her and found her standing just inside the entrance with a man beside her whom Roger had never seen before. He was the kind of man whom it would be very easy to forget, even if he had met him. He was about thirty-five, but was going a little bald already, was of medium height and fairly bony, and was wearing a rather shabby raincoat. He had a pale, very ordinary face, indeed there was an almost noticeable ordinariness about him, except for a slight grimness in his expression.

Coralie did not introduce him. She was looking shaken and shrinking. Roger had automatically held out his hand to the man, but he had appeared not to notice it.

"Well, come in," Roger said and led the way back into his office, closing the door behind them.

Coralie dropped at once into a chair, and though Roger asked the man to sit down, he ignored the invitation and remained standing. Roger went to the chair behind his desk.

"Well?" he said with all the cheeriness that he could force into his voice, just as if he believed that the man had come to open a big bank account. "What can I do for you?"

"It's my fault," Coralie said with a tremble in her voice. "I told the gentleman who you were and persuaded him to come to see you instead of taking any other steps at once. It was kind of him to have come."

"What does this mean?" Roger asked with sudden sternness in his voice. "Who are you?"

"I'm the store detective at Jarvis and Jarvis," the man answered in a flat voice, as if he were only too used to having to explain himself. Jarvis and Jarvis was the big department store a little way up the main street. "And I'm sorry to have to tell you that I detected Mrs. Gates appropriating certain articles which she left the store without paying for. Naturally I didn't challenge her until she'd actually left the store, but once she was out in the street I spoke to her and she admitted she'd taken the things."

"Good God, Coralie, what have you been up to?" Roger exclaimed. "What things?"

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"Just some tights and a bra," she said. "I told the gentleman who you were and that if he'd come here with me you'd pay for them. I really didn't know I hadn't paid for them, but it's quite true, they aren't on my receipt. I'm so terribly absentminded nowadays, half the time I don't know what I'm doing."

Roger felt his temper rising. In the intimate atmosphere of the village it had not been too difficult to keep it under control, to trust to the sympathy of the McQueens and to that of neighbours who knew Coralie's recent history. But here in the bank it was another matter.

"It's beginning to look as if you ought not to be out on your own," he said harshly. He looked at the man. "Of course I'll pay for the things, but will that be the end of the matter?"

"I can't really say," the man replied in his toneless voice. "I'll have to report the matter to the manager and it's up to the people at the top whether or not they call in the police and bring a charge."

"A charge!" Roger said. "In the magistrate's court? You mean they may actually do that?"

"They're entitled to do it. There was another witness to the event, so it wouldn't be difficult for them, and they've had a good deal of trouble of this sort lately. They may want to make an example."

"But if I pay . . ."

"I'm afraid I can't accept payment, sir. The goods have been returned and in any case, it isn't up to me to decide. I merely observed the lady slip them into a bag she was carrying and then fail to produce them at the checkout counter."

"But I thought all the stores were terrifically insured against shoplifting," Coralie said, "so even if I'd done something so crazy they wouldn't have lost by it."

"Coralie, please," Roger said bitingly. "Don't make things worse than they are."

But how could anything be much worse than having the possibility hanging over him, as apparently he had, that his wife, the wife of the manager of the main bank in the town, might be charged with shoplifting?

He spoke again to the man. "I'm not trying to excuse her, but my wife has been seriously ill recently and literally doesn't know what she's doing sometimes. And we're moving away shortly, going to London. Perhaps that will affect the situation."

"I'll certainly include it in my report," the man said. "How soon would that be?"

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"Within a month at the longest."

It would not be easy to arrange everything so soon, but if it had to be done to prevent the horror of the scandal here that Roger foresaw, it would have to be managed somehow. In London, where they were unknown, her strange behaviour, if it continued, could not be quite so disastrous. And for sure he would get her into the hands of a psychiatrist.

"Well, I'll do my best for you, sir," the man said, "and I daresay in the circumstances it may be no further steps will be taken."

"There, didn't I say he was kind?" Coralie said with a sudden charming smile. "Now I think I'll go home if they aren't going to arrest me."

She stood up, gave a little bow to the detective as she went, and left the office.

For some time after the detective also had gone Roger sat staring before him, but it was not until the evening, shortly before his normal time for leaving the bank, that he wrote three letters. He did not dictate them to his secretary, but wrote them himself. One was accepting the appointment that he had been offered in London. One was resigning from his position in Allingford. One was to one of the larger house agents in London. It was almost dark by the time he reached home, but he felt a deep reluctance to go into the house to join Coralie. When he had put his car away in the garage, he strolled out into the garden and wandered up and down the paths.

The colours of the flowers were all lost in the dusk. The pale pink clematis was a shadowy white, the forsythia looked almost black, the daffodils seemed to have vanished. Perhaps it was as well, he thought. In any case, he was going to have to give it all up, so he might as well accustom himself to the idea that the colours, the scents, the ever-changing patterns there that had so delighted him, had been prepared for someone else. Someone who would probably change everything, pull up what he had cherished, add what had no attraction for him.

Suddenly feeling extraordinarily tired, he at last went into the house.

Coralie was talking to someone. He heard her as soon as he opened the kitchen door. She was at the telephone in the hall. Still not quite ready to talk to her normally, or to discuss what had happened that morning, he stayed where he was.

He heard her say, "But, darling, don't you understand, your idea, it's worked! I feel so excited. At first I didn't think it was going to.

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Those people in the village shop were so bloody kindhearted that I believe I could have walked off with half their stock without their making a fuss. So today I took the risk of nicking a bra and some tights from the department store in town and made sure their detective saw me. But of course it might have meant getting involved with the police and being charged in court, which was a bit more than I was counting on. . . . What? . . . Oh, he hasn't come home yet, it's quite all right, I can talk. And I managed to get the detective to go with me to see him, and the risk of the real scandal there'd be if the shop decided to prosecute scared him stiff and he told the man we were leaving for London in a few weeks. So everything's going to be fine. It'll be so easy to meet. Meanwhile I've seen no reason to tell him that the child wasn't his. . . ."

It was at that point that Roger lost his head. Lunging across the kitchen, he seized her round the neck as she startled and put the phone down, and shook her and shook her until he knew that her neck was broken. There was no one to hear her screams. Then at last, and somehow aimlessly, he let her fall to the floor and stood looking down at her vacantly, as if he wondered what she was doing there.

It took him some minutes to decide what to do next. At last he moved her, but only to the bottom of the stairs, where he dropped her again, pulling her legs up onto the lower steps, spreading her arms out as if she had made a desperate attempt to save herself as she fell, and arranging her with her face buried in the rug at the bottom. He thought it looked convincing. Then he telephoned Matthew Bayliss.

"Matthew, can you come round at once?" he asked. It did not matter that his voice was shaking, that was only natural. "Coralie's had a terrible accident—tripped on the stairs—fell—I'm afraid she's—as a matter of fact, I'm sure. . . . She had a very nasty experience this morning and was very shaken. I oughtn't to have left her alone. . . . Yes, yes, but please come."

He put the telephone down, then he went into the sitting room and threw the three letters that he had not yet posted into the fire. Was that what he meant to do with them all along?

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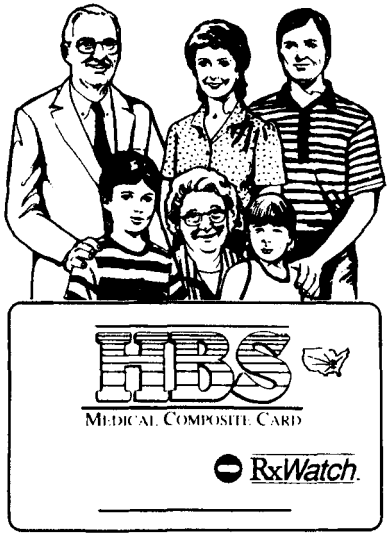

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a *NEW* Captain Leopold story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

In the last adventure of Captain Leopold (May, 1992), Mr. Hoch's veteran police detective had begun to feel the winds of his coming retirement in an assignment to lecture at the police academy. Now retirement is genuinely looming, and after thirty years on the force Leopold must show the ropes to a successor not of his choosing. But before the new man can step into Leopold's shoes, a cop is killed. Could this be Leopold's last case?

THE SUMMER OF OUR DISCONTENT

by EDWARD D. HOCH

It had been a bad summer for Captain Leopold, because he knew it would be his last before he was forced to retire from the police department. He was already a few months past the mandatory retirement age of sixty-five, and he'd spent much of August as a guest lecturer at the police academy. That was a sure sign he'd be called upstairs to the chief's office any day now to receive the news he dreaded.

"You'd better get ready to take over my desk," he told Lieutenant Fletcher on the Friday before the Labor Day weekend. "I hear today might be the day." Fletcher was the first of three names on the civil service promotion list, and no one in Violent Crimes doubted that he'd be taking over when Leopold left.

"Much as I hate to see you leave, I'll admit that *Captain Fletcher* has a nice sound to it."

The call came at two o'clock that afternoon and Leopold took the elevator to the chief's office on the top floor. Chief Ringold was only

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two years younger than Leopold and would be retiring soon himself. He understood the pain of it better than most, and he sympathized with what Leopold was going through. He was a beefy, balding man with a good record, tough but fair. Over the years he'd kept hands off Leopold's department and as a result their relations had remained good, if a bit formal.

"Good to see you, Captain," he said, shaking hands and motioning Leopold to a chair opposite his polished desk.

"I guess I know what this is for."

"Well, yes," Chief Ringold told him, offering a cigar which Leopold declined. "You turned sixty-five last month and there's that department retirement policy staring us in the face. I'll be there soon enough myself. We assigned you to the academy class for August to keep city hall happy, but now we're up against the wall and I've run out of excuses."

"I understand," Leopold said, calmer than he imagined he could be under the circumstances. "I appreciate your giving me the extra month."

"Actually, I think we can give you a little more than that. You can announce your retirement effective September thirtieth if you'd like. However, I want to appoint the new head of Violent Crimes on Tuesday, right after the holiday."

"I must say that Lieutenant Fletcher is looking forward to it."

Chief Ringold glanced at his desk, moving a few papers aimlessly. "It won't be Lieutenant Fletcher."

"What?"

"I've decided to promote Lieutenant Vivian to the position."

"Vivian!" Leopold felt the blood draining from his face. "He's never worked in Violent Crimes! He's head of the Burglary Squad!"

"It was a close call, to be sure." Ringold seemed suddenly uncomfortable. "But George Vivian is second on the civil service list and he's ten years younger than Fletcher."

"My God, Fletcher's only fifty-two! You're going to force him out with something like this!"

"No, no, I don't think so."

"Was this strictly your decision, Chief, or is there politics involved?"

"There's nothing, Captain. It was my decision alone. I was of two minds from the beginning and now with Fletcher's daughter on the force—"

"Lisa? What does any of this have to do with Lisa?"

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"There was that murder case while she was at the academy. You wrapped it up nicely, but she had some involvement. If at some future time she proves an embarrassment to her father, it would be best if he wasn't head of the Violent Crimes Squad."

"She'll never be an embarrassment to her father. She's one of the finest young women I know."

"You're a close friend of the family." He put his hands together as if in prayer. "Captain, I know this is difficult for you after working with the man for thirty years—"

"Damn right, it's difficult. And unfair!"

"I'd appreciate it if you could prepare Lieutenant Fletcher, so the news on Tuesday isn't too big a shock to him."

Leopold left the office and headed for the elevator, wondering what he would say to Fletcher. He needn't have worried. When he walked into the squad room, Fletcher was at his desk reading the front page of the afternoon newspaper.

"What do you think of this?" he asked, pointing out a two-column story at the bottom of the page.

Leopold could read the headline from where he stood. *Vivian in Line for Violent Crimes Post.*

Molly knew something was wrong as soon as Leopold walked in the door. "What happened?" she asked at once.

"The chief tells me I'm retiring the end of the month."

"You knew that was—"

"Fletcher's not replacing me. They're giving the job to George Vivian."

"Vivian? From the burglary squad?"

"Exactly. Worst of all, a rumor about it ran in tonight's paper. Fletcher saw it before I could break the news to him."

"You look like you could use a drink. I'll make some cocktails."

"How was your day?" he remembered to ask. She'd been due in court on a tricky inheritance case.

"I think the judge wanted a long weekend. He adjourned the case until Tuesday." Molly had given up her criminal law practice when they'd married six years earlier, but she still practiced a fair amount of civil law. She was only thirty-eight, and there were still times when she seemed more like his daughter than his wife. "But tell me about Fletcher. My God, I thought he had that promotion locked up!"

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"So did everyone. The chief gave me a lot of bull about George Vivian being ten years younger, as if that meant anything. Then he dropped Lisa's name into it."

"Lisa Fletcher?"

"He said her being on the force might cause some sort of problem."

"That's ridiculous!"

They talked about it over dinner, but there was nothing Leopold could say to give vent to his feeling of dejection and frustration. Not only was he being forced into retirement, but the man he'd groomed as his successor was being passed over in favor of someone with no experience in homicide or violent crimes.

"I should phone Carol. Maybe we can have them over on Monday."

"Fletcher's working the holiday," Leopold told her.

"Well, maybe—"

Her suggestion was cut short by the ringing telephone. Leopold answered, fearing it might be some reporter asking for a statement he didn't want to make. Instead he heard a voice he barely recognized. "Captain, this is George Vivian. How are you?"

"I—fine. How are you, Lieutenant?"

"Can't complain. Chief Ringold said he spoke with you. I'm terribly sorry the word got out to the papers before Fletcher had a chance to hear it from you or the chief."

"He wasn't too happy about it," Leopold conceded.

"That's why I'm calling. Gert and I have invited the Fletchers over for a cookout on Sunday afternoon. We were wondering if you and your wife could join us."

"Wait just a moment while I check our schedule with Molly." Leopold put down the phone and walked back to the dining room.

Molly listened to the surprise invitation and decided, "If Fletcher and Carol are going, we have to go too, if only for moral support."

"I'll hate every minute of it."

"Tell him we'll come."

Leopold returned to the phone and jotted down Vivian's address along with three o'clock, their expected arrival time. "We'll see you on Sunday," he said as he hung up.

"I'd better phone Carol when we finish dinner," Molly decided.

"Good idea."

They talked for the better part of a half hour, about the invitation and about Fletcher's frustration at being passed over for the promotion. As Molly told Leopold later, "He feels like this is the end of his

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career. He knows he'll be retired before Vivian ever leaves Violent Crimes."

Leopold simply stared at the floor and shook his head. "I'd rather stay on myself than see Fletcher lose that job."

"You can't stay on. You're already a month past the retirement age."

He gave her a weak smile. " 'Now is the summer of our discontent.' Who said that?"

"Shakespeare's Richard III, and it was winter, not summer."

"I guess it doesn't matter. We'll go Sunday. I owe that much to Fletcher, and a lot more."

George Vivian's house was a neat but modest place on the north side of the city, out near some of the better suburbs. Both cars were in the garage when Leopold and Molly arrived on Sunday afternoon, and he could see smoke rising from a backyard grill. It was obvious that either George or his wife spent a great deal of time in the garden, tending to a variety of late summer flowers whose names were foreign to Leopold. He'd met Gert Vivian once or twice at Christmas parties, and she hurried forward to greet them as they walked around the back of the house.

"So good of you to come, Captain! And Mrs. Leopold—"

"I'm Molly."

"Molly! I'm Gert." She was about Molly's age, but thinner and not as attractive to Leopold's eyes. Her dark hair was worn in a neat ponytail that seemed a bit too youthful.

"I was just admiring your flowers," Molly told her. "Those are a variety of mums, aren't they?"

While the women chatted about the garden, Leopold walked over to the barbeque grill where Vivian was just putting the steaks on. "How are you, George? Thank you for inviting us."

Vivian turned and smiled. His smile had always been warm and friendly, especially when he was trying to get a confession out of a suspect. Though Leopold didn't know him well, he'd heard good things about him. "I felt terrible about that story appearing in the paper before Fletcher knew about it. Gert suggested we have you all over this afternoon and try to get off on the right foot. I understand the chief is making the official announcement Tuesday morning."

"So he tells me." There were more sounds of greeting and he saw that Fletcher and Carol had arrived.

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"Can you put the rest of these steaks on for me?" Vivian asked. "I just want to say hello."

Leopold positioned the steaks over the hot charcoal and turned as Gert Vivian arrived to ask what he wanted to drink. "Just a beer," he said.

"It's terrible, George putting you to work like this! You're our guest."

"I don't mind," he assured her, and watched as she hurried into the house again.

Fletcher walked over, trying to look relaxed and cheerful. "I didn't expect to see you this weekend, Captain."

"Well, it's a nice gesture," Leopold said, dropping his voice a notch. "I suppose we can't blame Vivian for the way things are working out."

"Lisa feels terrible. She's convinced I lost the promotion because of that trouble she was involved in."

"Nonsense! She was cleared of any wrongdoing and she's patrolling downtown." Whatever else happened, he had no intention of repeating the chief's remarks about Lisa to her father. For one thing, he wasn't convinced it was the real reason for Vivian's promotion. In the police department, as in city hall, politics had a way of asserting itself.

They sat around with beers and cocktails until the salad was ready. Gert Vivian had really outdone herself, and smiled proudly when they complimented her. "George deserves the praise. He cooks the steaks," she insisted.

"No thanks to you!" he said with a chuckle. "Can you imagine her running out to get charcoal a half hour before the guests are due?"

"I forgot! I've had so much on my mind these last few days—"

Carol Fletcher's face darkened for an instant, perhaps thinking that it could have been her. Lieutenant Vivian must have caught the expression because he immediately changed the subject. "I'm glad you both had a free day on the holiday weekend. How do you work the holiday schedule in Violent Crimes, Captain?"

"Well, Sergeant Connie Trent is working today and Fletcher works tomorrow. I'm off this holiday but I'll be working the next—" He stopped in mid-sentence, realizing he'd be retired before another holiday appeared on the calendar.

"That sounds fair to everyone," Vivian decided, walking to the grill to turn over the steaks. "I realize I'm getting into something

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quite different from the burglary squad. I'll be depending on you a great deal, Lieutenant."

Fletcher grunted and took a sip of his beer. Leopold held his breath, aware that any comment Fletcher made could be bad. "I'll help in any way I can," he said finally.

The steaks were delicious, and Gert Vivian did everything she could to ease the tensions of the situation, bustling back and forth between the house and yard with fresh beer and a bowl of potato salad, all the while keeping up a stream of conversation with the other wives. It was a pleasant enough gathering for the end of summer, and nothing more was said about Vivian's promotion until Leopold and Molly were ready to leave, well after dark.

"They want me to start working with you as soon as I can," Vivian said. "At least a few hours a day, to learn how your department functions. I should go out on a couple of homicides."

"Sure," Leopold agreed. "That's the way to learn." Vivian didn't know him well enough to catch the sarcasm in the words.

Leopold was silent during the drive home. Finally Molly said, "That didn't go well, did it?"

"Oh, it was pleasant enough. If he wasn't screwing Fletcher out of his promotion, I could probably even like the guy."

"That's not his fault."

"Molly, it's got to be somebody's fault, damn it! A man like Fletcher gives his entire life to the department and this is how it all ends up!"

"What does Connie think about it?"

"I told her about it Friday after I talked to Fletcher. First time I ever saw her cry. She just kept saying how unfair it was."

"It is unfair," Molly agreed. "But Vivian and his wife seem like nice people. I hope Fletcher will give it a try before he does anything drastic."

Leopold slept late on the holiday, and he was just beginning to rouse himself when Molly came into the bedroom fully dressed. "It's nearly ten," she scolded. "You should be up. Fletcher's on the phone."

"Isn't he working?"

Leopold glanced out the window, pleased to see another sunny day, and picked up the extension. "Enjoying your holiday?" Fletcher asked.

"I was until now. What's up?"

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"Sergeant Patrick O'Mera. Do you know him?"

"Slightly. He's one of Vivian's people on the burglary squad, isn't he?"

"They found him early this morning in his car. He'd been shot once through the head."

"I'm on my way," Leopold told him and hung up. He wondered if anyone had notified George Vivian yet. He phoned the lieutenant's number but got an answering machine and hung up.

"You're going in on the holiday?" Molly asked.

"One of Vivian's sergeants was found shot to death. I don't know when I'll be back."

There was a gloomy intensity about the squad room when Leopold reached it. He'd seen the mood before when a cop had been killed. Nobody said much, as if they were all thinking it could have been them. Fletcher was on the phone as he entered. When he hung up, Leopold asked, "What's the story on O'Mera?"

"His car was in the parking lot of a branch bank on Maple Street, over on the north side. With the holiday weekend no one paid any attention to it until this morning when a patrol car pulled up to check it out. The officer found O'Mera slumped across the front seat, dead. The medical examiner just told me the time of death was probably mid-afternoon yesterday, but we can pin it down a little closer than that. O'Mera was off duty but on call. He phoned in around three-thirty to say he was going out but would be back shortly. Apparently he drove over to the bank parking lot to meet someone and they shot him."

Leopold shook his head sadly. "I didn't know him well but he seemed like a good cop. Any family?"

"Divorced. Two children moved to Virginia with the mother. George Vivian is trying to reach her."

"Then he knows about it. I tried to reach him."

"I phoned him right away, Captain. O'Mera was his man."

"Yes, of course. That was the right thing to do." Leopold grimaced. "O'Mera got it just about the time Vivian was taking our steaks off the fire."

"I hadn't thought of that."

"We need to know about his friends, and if he was working on any special cases."

"He was pretty friendly with Bill Carmichael. They were sergeants together on the squad. Carmichael was the one who took his call yesterday."

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"I'll talk to him. Any sort of evidence in the car? How about the murder weapon?"

"Probably a .38, but not O'Mera's. His was in his belt holster and hadn't been fired." The detective squads weren't yet equipped with the new 9-millimeter semi-automatics that patrolmen carried.

"Anything in his pockets?"

Fletcher hesitated. "It probably doesn't mean anything—"

"What is it?"

He pushed a plain white business-size envelope across the desk. Leopold recognized its grey smudges as fingerprint powder. "This was in his inside jacket pocket."

Leopold lifted the flap and saw the thin sheaf of hundred-dollar bills. "How much?"

"A thousand dollars."

"Any prints?"

"None."

"What do you think?"

Fletcher shrugged. "You always think of drug money or a bribe of some sort."

"It's hardly enough to be drug money these days."

"And he didn't work Narcotics anyway."

"No," Leopold agreed. "Let me go talk to Bill Carmichael."

He'd known Sergeant Carmichael for more than a decade, and the stocky redhead was one of Leopold's few friends in the department outside the Violent Crimes Squad itself. Now, entering the burglary squad room down the hall from his own, he saw Bill deep in somber conversation with two of his men. "How are you, Bill?" he asked.

Carmichael shook hands. "Holidays are always quiet here," he said, avoiding an answer. "It's the day after, when people return home, that we get all our calls."

"I heard about Pat O'Mera."

"Yeah, isn't it a hell of a way to go?"

"What was he working on?"

"Nothing special. Nickel and dime stuff."

The other two detectives had drifted away, aware that Leopold was there in an official capacity. "Fletcher tells me his wife moved south with the kids."

"Yeah."

"Did he have anyone else? A girlfriend?"

"Sometimes he went out with Sunny Novak. She used to be one of the 911 operators for emergency calls. Know her?"

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Leopold shook his head. "On my squad they usually end up with emergency room nurses, but I suppose the burglary detail doesn't make it to emergency too often. Were they living together?"

"Not so far as I know." He walked over to the desk that O'Mera had occupied, flipped through the Rolodex and removed a card. "Here's her address and phone number if you want it."

"Thanks." Leopold was about to mention the thousand dollars but decided that that information should go to Lieutenant Vivian first. "What did your boss say? Is he coming down?"

"He phoned right after Fletcher broke the news to him. Said he'd be in before noon."

Leopold glanced at his watch. "He should be here any minute, then. What about burglars that Pat sent away? Any of them get out recently?"

"I suppose they're getting out all the time. Let me check on a few of the more likely names for you."

George Vivian came in then, nodding to the other men and walking directly up to Leopold and Carmichael. His open, friendly demeanor of the previous day had given way to an all-business attitude. "Can I speak with you alone, Captain?"

"Certainly. Let's go back to my office."

Vivian paused and told Carmichael, "I spoke with Pat's ex-wife on the phone, but she's not coming up for the funeral. Says the kids start school on Wednesday and doesn't want to disrupt things with them."

Carmichael sighed. "Pat won't miss her."

They went down the hall and into Leopold's glass-walled office. "It's a terrible thing," Vivian said, pulling up a chair. "Just yesterday I was trying to decide whether to suggest Pat or Bill Carmichael as my replacement when I move over here."

"The chief doesn't always listen to suggestions."

Vivian shifted uneasily in his chair. "Look, I know you wanted Fletcher to take over, and he would have been a good man for the job. But it was the chief's decision and he made it. Are we going to start off with a feud?"

"Who's feuding?"

"I asked Fletcher about the case just now and he wouldn't tell me a thing. He said you were still in charge."

"Well, I suppose I am, for the rest of September."

"Pat O'Mera was one of my men. Under the circumstances I'd like to be in on this with you. All the way."

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Leopold picked up the envelope and handed it across the desk. "Maybe you can start with this. It was found in his jacket pocket. There were no prints on it."

"Money?" Vivian asked, peering inside.

"A thousand dollars. I want you to be honest with me, George. Were there ever any rumors of bribes or payoffs in your department?"

"Hell no! What is this? Some sort of attempt to discredit me? Are you planning to tell Chief Ringold that the burglary squad was corrupt under my command?" His face flushed with anger.

"Nothing of the sort," Leopold answered calmly. "You wanted to be part of the investigation so I'm telling you what we have."

Vivian tossed down the envelope with the money and tried to recover his composure. "I know nothing of any payoffs or bribes involving my department. This envelope alone proves nothing. What else do you have?"

"O'Mera was on call yesterday and he phoned Carmichael to say he was going out for a while. This was around three-thirty."

"He didn't have to call in. The holiday weekend is usually slow, and he would have been wearing his beeper anyway."

"Regardless, he did call in and talk to Carmichael. Then he drove to that bank parking lot, probably no more than five minutes from his house with the slim Sunday traffic. I think it's obvious he planned to meet someone there. Either that person gave him the money or he brought it to give the person. Instead, he was shot once at close range, probably with a .38 revolver since Fletcher made no mention of ejected cartridges. If the car windows were closed, the sound of the shot wouldn't have carried far enough in that empty lot to attract attention."

"Any possibility of suicide?"

"None. His service revolver was in its holster, unfired. There was no other weapon."

George Vivian nodded. "I appreciate the information, Captain. Forgive me for my outburst earlier. This thing has really shaken me."

"It's shaken all of us. No one likes to see a good cop gunned down." Leopold stood up, signaling that he had work to do. "And I'll speak to Fletcher, tell him you're working with us on this."

"I'd appreciate it."

Before he could call Fletcher into the office, Bill Carmichael appeared at the door. "I said I'd check on some burglars that Pat sent

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away. Here's one who was released about six weeks ago. He was a nasty sort. You might want to check on him."

Leopold accepted the file and glanced at it. Kevin Kane, age twenty-eight, just released after serving three and a half years of a five-year sentence for burglary and possession of an unlicensed firearm. "Thanks. We'll look into it." He set the file aside. "While you're here, Bill, I need to ask you about your phone conversation with O'Mera yesterday. Tell me everything he said."

"Well, it wasn't much. He called just before three-thirty, and when I answered he said, 'This is Pat. I have to go out now, but I'll be back soon.' Then he hung up. That was it."

"You're sure those were his words?"

"Pretty sure. I said, 'Hi, Packy,' because that's what I called him, but he kept right on talking like he didn't hear me."

"You're sure it was his voice?"

"Positive. I worked with the guy every day."

"Thanks, Bill. I'll let you know if anything develops with this Kevin Kane."

By Tuesday morning it was the top story in the newspaper, and Leopold, Fletcher, and Connie Trent were all working on it, with a bit more assistance from Lieutenant Vivian than any of them wanted.

"He acts like you're already gone and he's in charge!" Connie complained.

"I told him he could work with us. Pat O'Mera was his man. He told me he was getting ready to suggest either Pat or Bill Carmichael for promotion after he moves over here. Naturally he's anxious to get to the bottom of it."

"All right. What angle do you want me working on?"

Leopold shuffled through the reports on his desk. "I'm going out to talk with Sunny Novak. We still don't have a line on this paroled burglar, Kevin Kane. Check with his parole officer and try to get an address for him."

Sunny Novak had gone from being a 911 operator to serving as a hostess at the city's swank University Club. She was tall and attractive, with a winning smile and the correct personality for escorting wealthy businessmen and lawyers to their tables. Leopold waited until the lunch hour had ended before approaching her.

"Miss Novak?"

"Yes?"

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He showed his ID. "Captain Leopold, Violent Crimes. We're investigating the murder of Patrick O'Mera on Sunday. You probably read about it."

"Yes."

"Is there someplace we can talk?"

The dining room was all but empty and she led him to a nearby table. "Would you like some coffee, Captain?"

"Thank you, that would be nice."

She brought over two cups and saucers and then returned with a polished silver pot. "There, now. What can I help you with?"

"I understand you were a friend of Pat O'Mera's."

"We knew each other. I met him when I worked at headquarters, answering 911 calls."

"Did you have a romantic relationship?"

She shrugged and took a sip of coffee. "Sure, for nearly a year. Nothing wrong with that. We were both divorced and he was a nice guy."

"When did you break up?"

"About six months ago."

"Mind telling me why?"

"I guess he got interested in someone else. Those things happen. It was no big deal."

"You weren't jealous or upset?"

"Oh, for about a week, I guess. I got over it." Her green eyes suddenly flashed with apprehension. "Hey, you don't think I shot him, do you? I haven't seen him in months."

Leopold tried to calm her. "We have to pursue all possible leads. There's nothing to link you to the killing at this time. For the record, though, I have to ask where you were on Sunday afternoon."

"Alone in my apartment. I was painting the kitchen." As he got up to leave she asked, "When's the funeral?"

"Tomorrow morning, ten o'clock."

"I should go to it. We had some good times together."

Wednesday morning was warm and muggy, the sort of late-summer weather that frequently seems to occur on the first day back to school. Molly got out her best black dress and accompanied Leopold to the funeral. Fletcher and Carol were there too, along with Gert and George Vivian. At the cemetery, standing by the casket before it was lowered into the grave, he spotted Sunny Novak at the edge of the crowd of mourners, not far from Sergeant Carmichael.

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Chief Ringold came over to Leopold after the graveside service. "How's the investigation going? I'd like to tell the press that an arrest is near."

"I wish that were true. I have Fletcher and Sergeant Trent working on it full time, along with me. Lieutenant Vivian is assisting us too."

The chief nodded. "I postponed the official announcement of his promotion until after the funeral, out of respect to Sergeant O'Mera, but I'll be holding a news conference this afternoon at two. I'd like you to be there since he'll be taking your place in Violent Crimes."

The last thing Leopold felt like doing that afternoon was joining in the hoopla for his successor, but he could see no way out of it. "I'll be there," he promised.

As they walked together toward the cars, Leopold asked Connie about the ex-convict, Kevin Kane. "His parole officer just got back to me this morning with Kane's address. Do you want me to question him?"

Fletcher interrupted. "Captain, I've got an idea that I'd like to pursue with Connie this afternoon. It involves some of the houses bordering that big parking lot for the bank and shopping plaza."

"The uniform men already talked to the neighbors. No one noticed a thing."

Fletcher fidgeted. "I know. I just have this idea—"

"Go to it, Fletcher, I trust your judgement. Take Connie with you. I'll question Kevin Kane myself."

He decided Fletcher might just want to be out of the building when Chief Ringold made his announcement. If that was the case, he couldn't blame him. Maybe he felt like getting drunk with Connie in a bar.

At two o'clock he was in the auditorium of the city's public safety building across the street from headquarters. The place hadn't existed when Leopold became captain of the homicide squad, as it was called in those days, but for the past two decades it had been used to announce all sorts of government promotions, especially those connected with the police and fire departments. There were only a few dozen people present, plus the television news cameras, when Chief Ringold strode to the microphone to make his announcement. Leopold was on stage, seated next to Gert Vivian, while her husband was on the other side.

"A big day for you both," he whispered to her.

"George has worked hard for this."

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Chief Ringold opened with a tribute to Leopold's thirty years as head of the department. "Perhaps we'll never see his like again," the chief rambled on, "but we think we have a strong replacement in Lieutenant George Vivian, whose long and distinguished service on the burglary squad is well known to the community. Today I am announcing Lieutenant Vivian's promotion to captain and his appointment as commander of the Violent Crimes Squad. This appointment will be effective September thirtieth, the date of Captain Leopold's retirement from the department."

There was polite applause from the small crowd as the chief finished his announcement. Photographers and video cameras moved in to film the event. Chief Ringold shook hands with Vivian, Gert gave him a kiss for the cameras, and finally he and Leopold were photographed together. It was one of the low points of Leopold's career. Thirty years, for this? To surrender his job to a man he didn't really respect that much?

He tried to smile through it all, but when the photographers were finished he slipped quietly off the stage and out of the auditorium.

Kevin Kane was working at a car wash across town, and on this sunny Wednesday afternoon business was good. Leopold waited until there was a lull in the line of customers and approached him. Kane was a small man who'd had a reputation as a burglar of being able to slip through the narrowest of openings. Leopold showed his badge and said he had a few questions. "Can we go outside and talk?"

"Hey, you're not on the burglary squad!"

"No, I'm Violent Crime. Homicide, in this case."

"What's this about?"

They walked outside into the afternoon sun. "Sergeant O'Mera is the one who sent you away, right?"

"Yeah. I see he got his too."

"Last Sunday afternoon. What were you doing then?"

"I went to a movie."

"Alone?"

"Alone. Hell, you think I killed him?"

"You might have resented those years in prison."

"The only thing I ever resented about O'Mera was the way he used to inflate the burglary reports."

"What do you mean?"

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"Hell, I'd make off with a little cash and some jewelry, maybe a gun if I found one. Next day I'd read that the burglar got twice as much loot, things like computers and VCRs that I'd never bother lugging around."

"Did you tell the police about this?"

"I wasn't about to tell them when they didn't know I pulled the job. When O'Mera finally grabbed me, I told him about it. He said I was lying and that's when I knew he was the one who was taking the stuff."

Leopold had heard stories about crooked cops all his life. Coming from ex-cons, they weren't too reliable. "How could he steal things at a crime scene without anybody noticing?"

"You think it never happens? I've seen cops loading up their cars with Scotch after a burglary at a bar! If there's stuff scattered around in a bedroom, chances are the homeowner calls the police before he takes an inventory. It's easy for a cop to slip something extra into his pocket. Who's to know? The insurance company pays off and nobody really loses."

"What about the big stuff you mentioned?"

"He has a friend follow him to the crime scene with a car or even a van. If the property owners aren't around, the uniformed cops aren't likely to say anything. Maybe he even cuts them in."

"And Pat O'Mera was doing this?"

"Sure! He probably even stole drugs sometimes."

"If you resented him enough you might have killed him."

Kevin Kane merely laughed. "You try proving that!"

Leopold knew it wouldn't be easy. O'Mera wasn't the sort of cop to sit in a car with an ex-con and let him draw a gun without a struggle. But maybe there was a way to verify his story.

"Keep your nose clean," he told Kane as he left.

Sunny Novak was hostessing that evening at the University Club. Business was slow on the weeknight and Leopold had no trouble getting a few minutes alone with her.

"Now what?" she asked.

"I'm looking into a report that Pat O'Mera sometimes stole things from burglary scenes, before the property owners could determine just what was taken in the original break-in."

"I wouldn't know about that."

He decided to stretch the truth a bit. "The report says that a woman sometimes showed up and took away some items that

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O'Mera put in her car. That wouldn't have been you, would it?"

She moistened her lips. "Do I need a lawyer?"

"Look, I'm investigating a homicide, not a burglary. I just want to know if it's true."

"And if you're wearing a wire anything I say will turn up in court."

He sighed. People watched too much television these days. "I'm not wearing a wire, but if it'll make you feel easier you don't have to say a word. I'll ask you one question and all you have to do is nod or shake your head."

"Let's hear the question."

"Do you have any knowledge that Sergeant Patrick O'Mera ever stole anything from the scene of a burglary he was investigating?"

She hesitated, trying to read something in his eyes. Then she gave the faintest of nods. "Thank you, Miss Novak," he said quietly.

Leopold went back to his office. He hoped that Fletcher and Connie would be there but they were still out. So was George Vivian. He got out the file and checked the inventory of O'Mera's pockets. Wallet, keys, change, handkerchief, plain white envelope containing a thousand dollars in cash, .38 service revolver in belt holster, beeper, ballpoint pen, notebook. Nothing unusual. No gloves. Who'd be wearing gloves on a warm September day?

Leopold went home and had a late dinner with Molly. He refused to talk about the case. "What's bothering you?" she asked at last. "Retirement?"

"Oh, I suppose I could cope with that. Most people do. It's just that things aren't working out the way they should."

"You mean Captain Vivian?"

"Do you have to call him that?" he asked harshly.

"I'm sorry."

"I didn't mean to use that tone of voice."

"I know how you feel. I only wish there was something I could do."

He managed to smile. "You do it just by being here."

Thursday morning Fletcher was waiting for him in the squad room. "I think we've got it, Captain."

"Got what?" Leopold asked, glancing at the morning report on his desk.

"Pat O'Mera's killer."

Leopold's head jerked up. "What?"

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Fletcher sat down and took some photographs from his pocket. "The other day when I was out to that bank parking lot, I looked around and saw all the yards on the next street that backed up to it. With the shopping plaza it fills most of the block. There were houses across the street too. I remembered that we were at a cookout Sunday afternoon at the time of the murder, and I wondered if some of those families might have been having backyard gatherings for the Labor Day weekend. This time Connie and I didn't ask if they noticed anything in the parking lot. We asked if they'd been out in their yard that afternoon taking pictures."

Leopold reached for the photographs. "Let's see them."

"It was only one family quite a distance away, and they hadn't even picked up their photos yet. Connie did it for them."

Leopold stared down at the color pictures of small children playing, a man in a joke apron grilling hamburgers, some older people—grandparents?—on a picnic bench with the house behind them. Another photo showed a chain-link fence at the back of the yard with the empty parking lot beyond. In the last photo two cars, mere shapes in the distance, could be seen in the lot behind an attractive woman in white shorts, posed by the fence with two of the children.

"The one on the left is O'Mera's car," Fletcher explained. "The one on the right is almost certainly the killer's car. Connie is having that portion of the negative blown up as large as she can. We can't make out any people through the car windows, but I think we can get the number on that license plate."

Leopold looked up and smiled. "Damn fine detective work, Fletcher."

"Think it'll tell us who killed O'Mera?"

"I already know who killed him, but this picture is going to convince a jury I'm right."

When Connie arrived an hour later with the enlargement, Leopold inspected it briefly and then returned it to its envelope. He took it down the hall to show George Vivian, but Carmichael told him the captain had taken a vacation day. "Getting ready for his new job, I guess."

Leopold nodded. "I guess he deserves a day off. I'll catch him at home."

He drove out to the modest house on the north side of the city. It looked the same as it had on Sunday afternoon, with both cars in the garage, but this time he could see no one in the backyard. When

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he rang the bell, George Vivian answered almost at once.

"Leopold! It's good to see you. Come on in."

"Sorry to bother you on your day off, but it's important. We've got something on Pat's killing."

"What is it?" He led the way into the family room and they sat down. Leopold could hear Gert vacuuming upstairs.

"I have to run through my reasoning on this, George."

Vivian snorted. "Your reasoning's fine, but we need something that'll stand up in court."

"Hear me out. The thing that bothered me about this case was Pat O'Mera's phone call to the squad room on Sunday afternoon. There was no reason for him to tell Carmichael he was leaving the house, not when he was wearing his beeper. Besides that, he simply gave his message and hung up. When Carmichael tried to say something he kept on talking."

"What does that prove?"

Leopold leaned forward on his chair. "According to Carmichael, O'Mera said, 'This is Pat. I have to go out now but I'll be back soon.' He didn't let Carmichael speak, and referred to himself as Pat, a name Carmichael never called him. Don't you see, George? It was a recording, the sort of message O'Mera might have left on a friend's telephone answering machine."

"Why would he call Carmichael and play a recording?"

"He wouldn't, but his killer would, if an alibi was necessary."

Vivian frowned. "Do you think Bill Carmichael is lying about the call?"

"No. If he were lying he'd have invented a two-way conversation with O'Mera, not this strange one-sided thing. And there's more. We found that envelope in O'Mera's pocket containing a thousand dollars."

"Are you back to that? I told you there were no bribes or payoffs on my squad."

"Someone wanted to make it look like it, though. The trouble is, there were no fingerprints on the envelope or the money. None. That meant it had been wiped clean. O'Mera didn't have gloves with him, so he couldn't have put the money in his own pocket without at least leaving smudges. The killer put it there, George, to make it look like some sort of corruption scandal. So what do we have? A carefully planned murder that probably had some motive other than corruption. A murder that probably took place *before* that phone call to the squad room around three-thirty. Remember, the medical examiner

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simply placed the time of death at mid-afternoon. Remember too that O'Mera didn't draw his gun, and that he was probably shot with a .38, similar to his service revolver."

"You're trying to pin it on another cop, aren't you? Bill Carmichael? Is that it?"

"I already told you why it couldn't be Carmichael. He'd have told us a different story on the phone call. I questioned O'Mera's former girlfriend and a burglar he sent away. Neither had an alibi for Sunday afternoon, so paradoxically they must be innocent. If the killer phoned in with a recording of O'Mera's voice it was because he *did* have an alibi for three-thirty and after."

George Vivian gave a snort. "I had an alibi for that time. We were all here at my house."

"Exactly, George."

"What?"

"I want to run a ballistic test on your service revolver."

Vivian was on his feet. "Are you out of your mind, Leopold?"

He opened the envelope he'd been carrying and brought out the enlarged photo. "This is your car, parked in the bank lot next to O'Mera's car."

"My car, my gun? You're accusing me of killing Pat O'Mera!"

Leopold closed his eyes for just an instant. He'd been through these scenes so many times. Was this to be the last one? "I need to have the gun, George."

"It's upstairs."

"I know you didn't kill Pat. O'Mera was taking things from burglary scenes and selling them. Sometimes he used a lady friend to drive the extra loot away before anyone checked on what was stolen. He dropped his old girlfriend for a new one about six months ago. It was the girlfriend who killed him because her husband had just gotten a nice promotion and she wanted to break it off with O'Mera. He threatened to tell her husband about their affair and that she helped him skim off some extra loot from burglaries."

"Gert—?" It was barely a whisper.

"It was her idea to invite us Sunday afternoon for a cookout. She was the one who had to dash out for a bag of charcoal just before our arrival. She was the one who was in and out of the house so much, making it easy to play a tape of O'Mera's voice that he'd once left on her answering machine. She killed O'Mera with your gun when she supposedly went for the charcoal, then came back and concocted her alibi with that tape while we were all out in the yard."

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Then Gert Vivian was standing in the doorway staring at them, holding the revolver loosely in one hand. Leopold saw her, and knew he had to draw his weapon. Instead he stood up and walked slowly toward her. Perhaps this was the way it was all going to end, with a bullet through his head the way Pat O'Mera had died.

"The thousand dollars was my cut of what he'd stolen," she said quietly. "I gave it back to him after I shot him. I wanted to be clean again. For you, George. For your job." She looked down at the weapon in her hand and held it out to Leopold. "I think this is what you're looking for. I cleaned it afterward, of course, but the bullet will match."

It was Fletcher who brought him the news two days later. "Vivian has handed in his resignation. He's quitting the department."

"I'm sorry it had to happen like this," Leopold said.

"Chief Ringold offered me the job. Captain of the Violent Crimes Squad. I felt like telling him to shove it."

Leopold glanced at him. "I hope to hell you didn't!"

"I told him I'd take it. I even thanked him. God, Leopold, what's happened to me?"

"You've just inherited my job." He put his arm around Fletcher's shoulders. "And I couldn't be happier."

"Q"

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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

In the years that Anthony Boucher or John Dickson Carr occupied this reviewing chair, works about real-life crime were frequently covered along with the fictional. True crime has entered a new vogue in recent years, with unprecedented volume and popularity, but the equally increased output of crime fiction is generally plenty to keep this department busy. Still, there are certain classic cases, unsolved or controversial, with a special appeal for mystery readers—Lizzie Borden, say, or the Princes in the Tower, or the assassination of J.F.K. There are interesting new books on two such: the Jack the Ripper crimes of 1887 and the murder of film director William Desmond Taylor in 1922.

In *Murder & Madness: The Secret Life of Jack the Ripper* (Fine , $21), forensic psychiatrist David Abrahamsen, whose previous subjects range from Richard Nixon to Son of Sam, weighs in with his opinion of who committed the Whitechapel murders. He doesn't offer a new suspect but rather a team of two accused by previous commentators—two of the most interesting candidates but previously not argued this effectively. Despite the use of newly released Scotland Yard materials on the case, the solution remains in the theory category, but the author presents an efficient summary of the evidence with a fresh psychological line of argument.

Bruce Long's *William Desmond Taylor: A Dossier* (Scarecrow Press, P.O. Box 4167, Metuchen, NJ 08840; $47.50) is a more specialized and scholarly work, a compendium of primary sources as fascinating for students of early Hollywood as of unsolved crime. Most of the book is a meticulously annotated clipping file of newspaper and magazine pieces by or about Taylor in the years leading up to and following his murder. Long also reprints a 1930 article from *True Detective Mysteries*, "I Know Who Killed Desmond Taylor," by one of the police investigators, discusses the theories of the case presented by Sidney Kirkpatrick in *A Cast of Killers* (1986) and Robert Giroux in *A Deed of Death* (1990), and presents long sections of "possible errata" in both books.

**** Phyllis A. Whitney: *The Ebony Swan*, Doubleday, $21.00. In a splendid romantic suspense novel set on Virginia's Northern Neck, the peninsula between the Rappahannock and Potomac rivers, Whitney departs from her usual pattern by writing in the third person and featuring two virtually co-equal heroines: 72-year-old former ballerina Alexandrina Montoro, haunted by the ostensibly accidental death of her daughter years before, and granddaughter Susan

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Prentice, who after witnessing at age six her mother's death was whisked away to the Southwest by her father. When Susan returns, the various secrets are gradually revealed with the author's customary constructional skill. In her late eighties, Whitney remains a consummate master, bringing her characters and background to life and, scornful though she is of conventional detection, even providing a neat fair-play clue to the killer.

**** Ed Gorman: *Prisoners & Other Stories,* CD Publications, P.O. Box 18433, Baltimore, MD 21237; $20.95. Though private eye Jack Dwyer appears in two powerfully crafted tales, "The Reason Why" and "Failed Prayers," there are few detective stories among the twenty-two entries in this generous collection, drawn mostly from little magazines and original anthologies with one (the chilling and uncompromising "The Ugly File") not previously published. As Dean R. Koontz points out in his afterword, Gorman loves and draws upon any number of fictional genres—westerns, horror, mainstream short stories à la Irwin Shaw. Nearly all the stories deal with some form of crime, though many are not amenable to conventional punishment. His favored backgrounds run to the darkside—bars, buses, truck stops, hospitals, prisons—and his characters to disillusioned middle-agers, threatened children, discordant families, though the bleak world view is seldom unleavened by some gleam of hope for the human species. This is a distinguished collection.

*** Joe Gores: *Mostly Murder,* Mystery Scene/Pulphouse, Box 1227, Eugene, OR 97440, $5.95. The first collection of another formidable and versatile writer gathers eight stories, half from *EQMM,* beginning with the first tale in the DKA File series and ending with the Edgar-winning "Goodbye, Pops," with a variety of types in between: early and late gangster/hitman stories, science fiction, counter-culture terrorism, Agatha Christie-style gameplaying, and a searing account of an execution in California's gas chamber.

*** Adam Hall: *Quiller Solitaire,* Morrow, $20.00. British espionage agent Quiller, who debuted with *The Quiller Memorandum* (1965), returns for his sixteenth adventure, infiltrating a terrorist group called Nemesis that is planning some sort of horrific disaster involving a major commercial flight. You will spend the final breathless pages wondering just how Hall (pseudonym of Elleston Trevor) can possibly get his durable hero out of this one. This is the kind of book for which the term *thriller* was invented.

*** Colin Dexter: *The Jewel That Was Ours,* Crown, $20.00. In the ninth entry in a distinctive series that determinedly recalls the Golden Age of Detection, Oxford's Chief Inspector Morse and Sergeant Lewis investigate murder and the theft of a jewel called the Wolvercote Tongue among a cast of American tourists. Though it's not noted anywhere in the book, the story had an earlier life as a TV se-

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rial. (One quibble: though Dexter handles us colonials better than some British writers, there are phrases in the handwritten letter on pages 72 to 75 that make one doubt it could have been written by an American and one spelling error that makes it virtually impossible.)

*** Robert Sims Reid: *The Red Corvette,* Carroll & Graf, $18.95. Leo Banks, former Montana cop, travels to small-town Illinois to look for the killer of a college friend at the request of the widow, who is also his long-ago love. The crime seems to be connected to a fifty-year-old local murder the dead Dr. Gerry Heyman had been investigating. Himself a police detective and a member of crime fiction's celebrated Montana group, Reid does a good enough job with character, background, plot, and narrative to overcome some cliches and excesses. (For one, the running joke about various townspeople getting the out-of-town investigator's state of origin wrong gets tiresome very fast.)

** Michael Underwood: *The Seeds of Murder,* St. Martin's, $17.95. The latest case for London solicitor Rosa Epton is solidly in the English village mystery tradition. Her eighty-year-old godmother has found apparent happiness as wife of a postmaster scarcely more than half her age, but clouds appear when the doting husband is accused of a murder that may be connected to a local scandal of almost sixty years before: the unsolved vanishing and presumed murder of a student at the local boarding school. Rosa and boyfriend Peter Chen are likable characters, and Underwood's practiced low-key storytelling is smooth as ever, but some motivations are questionable and the plot doesn't quite live up to its early promise.

** Robert B. Parker: *Double Deuce,* Putnam, $19.95. Spenser and Susan try living together; Hawk has a girlfriend; Parker is coasting down an easy slope of self-parody. The background, presented with some insight, is a gang-controlled Boston housing project. If a typical Spenser novel will satisfy you, snap this up. If you only like Parker at his best, pass it by. If you prefer private-eye novels with some semblance of a mystery plot, try another writer.

** Andrew M. Greeley: *Happy are the Merciful,* Jove, $5.50. With a long list of bestselling books behind him, Greeley still has plenty of rough edges. Despite a double impossible-crime (locked room with virgin snow on the ground), this novel about Chicago's Bishop Blackie Ryan falls short of earlier entries in the Beatitudes series. The author overdoes some characters' speech peculiarities, the solution is a disappointment, and the narrative is both self-indulgent and unbelievable. Still, the author takes such obvious enjoyment in what he's doing, many readers will be willingly carried along.

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a ***NEW*** short story by

PENELOPE WALLACE

Penelope Wallace wrote her first story at the age of eight, the year her father, the renowned thriller writer Edgar Wallace, died. Ms. Wallace's own stories have been published in thirteen countries. One was adapted for American television, and four of her books have been published in the U.K. In addition to pursuing her own career as a writer, Penelope Wallace has run her father's literary estate since 1960, and was responsible for reviving the Tallis Press, a company he founded. We are delighted to once again hear her distinctive voice in EQMM . . .

TRUTH TO TELL

by PENELOPE WALLACE

Meriam was a compulsive liar. She lied about the small things in life: "Yes, my hair's naturally blonde"—with brown roots. "I'm just twenty-two"—she was twenty-four. "My boyfriend, John Manners, has a high position in the bank"—he was a cashier. "Of course we don't sleep together; we're getting married."

The former statement was false, but the latter was true. For John Manners was in love with Meriam—lies and all; and when she said she loved him, he knew it was so. She also told him that he was the greatest lover since Casanova, and here, male vanity assured him she spoke the truth.

As to the large things of life; she had loved her parents—and told them so—and she loved John Manners. In twenty-four years no other large things had come her way.

Meriam had a flatlet in Maida Vale—postal district Kilburn—and here she produced dinner for John ("I'm proud of my cooking") on

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Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays. On Mondays they went to the cinema; on Fridays they queued for the theatre. Saturdays and Sundays they drove into the country in John's old Ford.

Sometimes Tuesday's routine was disturbed by John's visit to his parents. He would press Meriam to go with him, but like many liars, she knew she was not believed and fear kept her away.

It was on a Wednesday following such a Tuesday that Meriam's life changed.

"I tried to ring you when I got back to the flat, but there was no answer."

"I was in all evening."

"Well, I rang twice."

"You must have dialed the wrong number."

"No, Meriam, I don't mind you going out, but why say you were in when . . ."

He was interrupted by a knock at the door. Meriam opened it. An elderly lady stepped in, peered at John, and started to speak.

"Forgive me for coming in when you've got a visitor, but you left your knitting pattern behind yesterday evening and I thought . . ." She smiled vaguely and trotted off.

When the door closed, John turned to Meriam.

"I think it was very sweet of you to go and sit with the couple next door, but why couldn't you have told me when I said I rang you? Why did you lie?"

"I don't know," she admitted, and went into the kitchenette to check on the progress of dinner.

"And another thing," said John when she reappeared, "why aren't you wearing your glasses?"

"I don't need them anymore—the optician said . . ."

He took her arms and pulled her gently to him.

"Darling," he said, "you look beautiful in glasses—please wear them."

"I'll put them on later—I must bring in the dinner. I've made something really special and it'll be overcooked." And she broke away from him and went back to the kitchenette.

He heard the clatter of dishes and then she was coming through the archway with the tray.

As he went forward to help her, he thought how beautiful she looked in her blue caftan.

It happened suddenly.

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She crossed towards the table, caught her foot on the stool, and *crash*. . . .

She lay still and silent and he knelt beside her to wipe the Vesta beef curry off her white face and the Marks and Spencer cheesecake from the lids of her faulty blue eyes.

He waited for those blue eyes to open, for her to say that someone had moved the footstool.

She lay very still and when he felt her wrist the pulse seemed faint. She must have hit her head as she fell . . .

The ambulance came at last and John, clasping Meriam's handbag, rode with the stretcher to the hospital.

There were endless x-rays and, finally, he was told that Meriam was in no danger and would probably regain consciousness in the early hours of the morning. He was told to go home, but he waited on the hard bench until finally a nurse told him he could see her for a moment.

Some colour had come back to her face, and she opened her blue eyes and smiled at him.

It was a smile he was to remember. He went home, showered, changed, and set out to the bank.

Even banks have hearts, and after he recounted fifty pounds three times, the story came out and he was sent home. On the way, he phoned the hospital and was told that Meriam was sleeping and he could come see her at 6 P.M. He set the alarm for five and fell into bed.

She was sitting up when he arrived—wearing her glasses and chatting to the nurse. "Well, actually, my name's Mary, but I've always preferred Meriam— Oh hullo, John. I was just telling nurse what a fool I'd been, trying to carry that tray without my glasses—and what a waste of good food. Of course I'm a rotten cook, but you can get excellent packet food. Maybe I should go to cookery classes on Tuesday evenings."

"You see," said the nurse, "she's her old self again."

But she wasn't, for by some miraculous means, the concussion had stopped her lying.

John left the hospital in a cloud of happiness—his beloved Meriam, her one imperfection gone, would be out of the hospital in three days, although she was off work for a week.

They celebrated her return with a quiet dinner out.

"It's wonderful to have you back," he told her. "When will you marry me?"

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"Whenever you like, John. I feel so much more sure of myself these days."

"And you'll come and meet my parents on Tuesday?"

"I'd love to, Darling."

John Manners's father was a solicitor and lived in a neat little house at St. Albans. The neatness came from his wife, a neat little woman with a predilection for net curtains and high hedges, as though she and her husband held unspeakable orgies which must be kept from the other residents of Orchard Road; in fact, the nearest to orgiastic behaviour was a foursome at bridge on Saturday evenings.

Mrs. Manners was aware that John had a girlfriend and wondered what defect she had that John never brought her to visit them.

Now the great moment was approaching, for her son had made it clear that the girl he was bringing was her future daughter-in-law. She plumped up the cushions on the fawn sofa and straightened one crooked duck flying across the wall; the table was set in the dining room and dinner neatly advanced in the kitchen. She smoothed the skirt of her new blue dress—wondering whether it wasn't perhaps too young for her—and walked over to the window to wait for the new arrivals.

John's old Ford was at the garage, so he and Meriam—"I wish you'd call me Mary; it *is* my real name"—travelled by train and managed to find a taxi at St. Albans station.

"You are," said John, "still an invalid."

In the taxi Meriam clasped his hand.

"Do I look all right? I know blue suits me but . . . And what will your mother think of my glasses? She'll think our children will all be shortsighted and she's probably right. . . ."

The taxi stopped and John helped Meriam out, paid the driver, and held her arm as they went up the garden path and rang the doorbell; John had a key but he felt the occasion demanded the formal ring.

Mrs. Manners opened the door and drew them into the hall, and as they exchanged the banal comments of strangers who hope to become better acquainted, Mrs. Manners was taking in the blue dress which reflected the colour of Meriam's eyes, the glasses which covered them, the way she did her hair, and the approximate cost of her shoes.

"Dinner will be in half an hour but I expect you'd like a cup of tea in the meantime." She led the way to the living room. "This is

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my husband, James—I'll go and put the kettle on."

In no time, she was back with the tea tray.

"We're having jugged hare for dinner—one of John's favourites—you do like jugged hare, don't you, Meriam?"

"No, I'm afraid I don't."

Silence stretched as tea was poured out and handed round.

"I can make you an omelette," said Mrs. Manners finally, and the matter appeared to be settled—and hopefully forgotten.

Conversation returned safely to the weather, the garden, and the wrong-headedness of the government.

No one asked Meriam a direct question and all was peaceful until they stood up to go in to dinner.

"New dress, Mother?" asked John.

"Yes, do you like it? I'm not sure about the colour and I'm afraid it might be a little young for me."

"No, Mother, it's perfect—isn't it, Meriam?"

Meriam of old would have assured his mother that it was perfect, that she was young enough and attractive enough to carry it off.

Meriam of today thought for a moment.

"Well, truth to tell, blue isn't your colour, Mrs. Manners, and I do think an older style would be more suitable."

Dinner was mainly a silent meal, with John and his father commenting on cricket, football, and golf, about which neither knew much but both hoped that Meriam knew even less.

As soon as they had finished their coffee, which was served in the living room, and before anyone could misguidedly ask Meriam if she admired the flight of ducks, John said they must go, and Mr. Manners offered to drive them to the station.

During the drive he kept up a monologue on the high price of property—whether as a general subject or to dissuade John from marriage with its subsequent acquisitions, his son was unable to divine.

John and Meriam parted on Meriam's doorstep. He kissed her lightly.

"Darling," he said, "I asked you to tell the truth but not *all* the time."

The following day Meriam started work again, and when John called in the evening, he found her in tears.

"They were so horrible to me at the office," she wailed.

"What happened?"

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"Shirley told us she'd got engaged to Brian Smith in accounts and wasn't she lucky?"

"And what did you say?" groaned John.

"The truth, of course; that luck didn't come into it as she'd worked so hard to hook him, and that he wasn't much of a catch because he's a groper—he almost got me in the stationery cupboard at the Christmas party."

"That was very unkind."

"It was the truth."

John wiped away her tears and one thing began to lead to another—which it hadn't since her concussion.

"Let's go over to the bed," he whispered in her ear.

She pulled herself free.

"Darling," she said, "there's a book I want you to look at first, and then we'll lie on the hearth rug."

"Why?"

"The book says . . ." She reached out for it and put it in his hand. "I'm going to change," she said.

He glanced at the book while she disappeared into the tiny bathroom. Anger mounted in him and then she was back in a transparent black nightdress and draping herself on the rug.

He threw the book in the corner and snatched off his jacket.

"Lie beside me," she said huskily.

"But why the book?"

"I thought it would be useful."

He knelt beside her.

"But you always said I made love superbly, that it was the most exciting . . ."

"I was a terrible liar."

He reached out his hand and grasped the poker which picturesquely hung by the gas fire. . . .

She looked very white as he took off her glasses, found a respectable housecoat, and put it on her limp figure. Then he put on his jacket before dialing 999.

"Yes," he told the ambulance men, "I'm afraid she wasn't wearing her glasses again and she hit her head on the fender."

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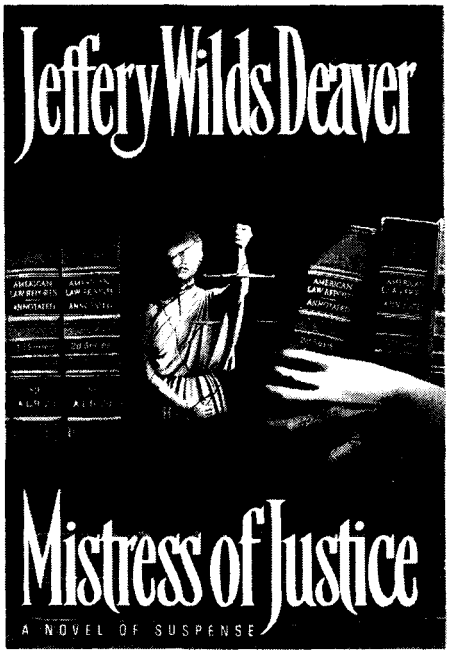
In some Wall St. firms, lawyers can get away with murder.



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1991 saw the publication of David Delman's mainstream novel Ain't Goin' to Glory *(St. Martin's Press), but the author is primarily known for a series of mystery novels featuring amateur sleuths Jacob and Helen Horowitz. Mr. Delman is a retired advertising executive who currently lives near Philadelphia. He ventures here to a small town in Florida, where a "Nooo Yawwwker" finds he is an unwelcome intruder . . .*

THE CONSPIRACY

by DAVID DELMAN

Country breakfast warm in his belly, Sy Sherman stepped out of the dining room of the Cypressville Arms and headed for the Cypressville jail. It was a three-block walk to the intersection of Mercer and Dinwiddie streets, the cashier had told him helpfully, though not without a certain overlay in her manner. This, he understood, indicated that she had positioned him next to Jack Fitzroy, as had the room clerk, the housekeeper, and the elevator operator before her. The whole town knew about Jack's wire, Sy felt certain. What would it be like, he wondered, to live in a town where communication was so . . . total?

He passed the white marble bank, the barbershop, Marge's Dry Cleaning, the white marble post office, the tax collector's office, Burris & Sons hardware, the two-story building that contained the liquor store *and* the Cypressville Volunteer Fire Department, the bike shop, the railroad tracks that bisected Main Street, the small but pretty plaza-like park with its four tall representatives of the cypress family (aha!) aligned like sentinels, and had a hackle-rising answer to what life would be like.

This embraced everyone and everything he had seen since alighting at the door of the Cypressville Arms the previous night, after a nondescript fifty-five minute bus ride from Ft. Lauderdale's airport. Basically, life would be clean. Uniformly clean. Overwhelmingly clean. City mice would not be happy here, he told himself, a value judgment.

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And what about Fitzroy, that in-your-eye radical and author of two densely intellectual novels, the prevailing theme of which was hell in a handbasket for the human race? What was Cypressville life like for him? And how in heaven's name had he ever managed to land here?

No answer was forthcoming of course, but by now he had reached Mercer and Dinwiddie where three cars had paused for a light. (What was that, a traffic jam?) Gazing at the white marble object of his search, Sy shook his head at such antisepsis. It gleamed in the sun, one story but ample, and failed to resemble any jail of his experience. Nor did the white wooden sign centered on the green, freshly cut lawn, actually say jail. It said, "Cypressville Police, D.M. Gibson, Sheriff." Disoriented and suspicious, Sy crossed the street as if it were a bridge into the Twilight Zone.

On opening the door, however, he saw at once the poster depicting a gore-drenched, gunned-down policeman. It was captioned, "Don't be a dead hero, use precaution." This, surrounded on the bulletin board by the usual law-and-order conglomeration of good advice and wicked faces, had the paradoxical effect of restoring his balance somewhat. It was a touch of home. The same poster hung in Sy's squad room and was a message he had taken to heart. Next, his attention went to "D.M. Gibson, Sheriff," who, having just put down her phone, was focusing attention on him.

She was tall, very tall, a shade under six feet, he estimated, a fact of more than passing interest to a man who was six feet five. Her lightweight summer uniform was immaculate, wrinkle-free, and complimentary to her fine, strong body. Her eyes were grey. Her hair was thick, black, and curly, cut short, and she had two remarkable dimples which could, he guessed, turn her smile into a thing of importance. But smiles were not about to happen. It was clear Sy was not smile-provoking material. Either that, or it had been one real bad phone call.

"Yes, I sure enough *am* the sheriff," she said, asperity quickening but not quite burying her south Florida drawl.

"Who said no?"

Her eyes swept his length and breadth like Indian scouts in hostile territory. Rising, she came around to the front of her neat desk to rest a haunch on it. "You're sure enough staring hard, Lieutenant."

It was a fair comment, and he forced himself to cease and desist. "Sorry," he said. Then: "You know who I am?"

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"Jack Fitzroy sent a wire to Lieutenant S. Sherman, Nassau County Homicide up in Nooo Yawwwk"—sardonic emphasis— "and since you're here I reckon that must be you."

"It's me."

Her own inventory complete now, she summed it up for him—more charitably in fact than he had anticipated. "You don't look much like I thought you would," she said.

He nodded. "Because I'm so big. For some reason nobody ever expects me to be so big. Not even my mother."

"Your mother?"

"That was a joke."

"New York cops on TV generally look like dudes is what I meant. You don't."

"There's Columbo," he said.

She kept silent.

He pointed to one of the two no-frills chairs before her desk and, when she failed to withhold permission, dropped into it. "Hot in your town," he said. "Saps the strength."

"July's July. Even in New York probably."

"Probably. What'd we ever do before air conditioning?"

She showed no eagerness to speculate. Was she forty yet? Just, he decided. Was she married? No ring, but that didn't necessarily signify. How did she feel about fiftyish widowers? He wondered if she had a deputy. He thought that at least might be safe to ask.

"He's up in Redrock, collecting a prisoner," she said. "That's Carter County, next one over."

A desperate fly beat wings against the window. She crossed the room purposefully, but by the time she got there it had disappeared.

"He couldn't call?" he asked. "You wouldn't let him use the phone?"

Returning, she resumed the seat behind her desk. "Right," she said. "And when he tried I broke his arm. How do you think he sent the wire?"

"So he didn't *want* to call? Why didn't he?"

"Ask him." But then she said, "Maybe he thought a wire would seem more urgent. Maybe he thought that was the only way he could be sure y'all'd come." She glanced at him, interested in the answer.

He kept silent.

"Or, maybe, since it's Jack Fitzroy we're talking about, he just wanted to be a pain in the butt. More or less like one of his own no-

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account heroes." She saw his surprise before he could muffle it. "Yeah, some of us crackers can read."

"You like his books?"

"Not much. Page after page of pains in the butt."

It was an assessment close enough to his own to make him smile. "Speaking of reading, I went through the Cypressville *Gazette* this morning, thinking I might pick up a hint. As to his trouble, I mean. Nothing. So I figure maybe it's not that serious after all."

"That what you figure?"

"I figured wrong?"

She examined her fingernails before buffing them briskly against the sleeve of her shirt. "Yeah," she said.

"Tell me."

Her chair had been tilted against the wall. Now she powered it forward so that the legs thumped the floor as if it had misbehaved.

"Circus comes through here every spring like clockwork," she said. "Joe Dobbs—the *Gazette* publisher?—I guess he felt one a year's all we need." She regarded him as if he had Ringling Brothers stenciled on his forehead.

"In other words, Cypressville can manage its own business," he said.

She folded her arms across her nicely rounded chest.

"In its own way."

He put some English on it, letting a bit of emphasis slow it down. How little she cared for that showed in her eyes. Their glances held. He waited, giving hers a chance to fall away. No sale. "What kind of serious?" he asked finally.

"Murder."

His whistle was prolonged but gentle.

"Well, that's not all that big of a reaction, Lieutenant. You see him as capable of murder, you being a good buddy of his?"

"One, everybody's capable of murder. Two, I guess I knew all along he wouldn't send for me to fix a ticket. Sheriff, we're acting like we got off on the wrong foot, you and me. I say we try to do something about that. What the hell, we both wear badges."

He got something like a smile from her—only one dimple power, but the potential made his heart stir.

"What's the D. M. for?" he asked.

"Donna Mae. But Sheriff'll do nicely if you don't mind." Back to crisp and starchy, as if to remind him there were cultural and other gaps.

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He sighed. "Murder, you said, Sheriff?"

"The county prosecutor hasn't flat out made up his mind yet, but my guess is the charge *will* be first degree. The victim was Mrs. Fitzroy."

"Jack's wife? I didn't know he had a wife."

"A rich wife. Rich as they come hereabouts. Her name was Ella Beauvance. Ella Beauvance Fitzroy, I mean. Beauvances have been in these parts . . ." She broke off, suddenly self-conscious. A moment later, however, face and eyes under strict control again, she added, "Ella was the last of them."

"You liked her a lot?"

"Well, you could hardly say Beauvances and Gibsons traveled in the same circles. But, yeah, I liked her. She was nice-spoken. No airs. And maybe I even felt sorry for her, funny as that might seem. In spite of the bucks, she was always . . . this lost soul. Like she just couldn't find a place for herself. Like she had just given up on the notion that something good might ever happen for her."

It was a long speech, and Sy could tell she wasn't used to them. "Damn fly's a nuisance," she said, as if it had materialized again, though it hadn't. "I hate flies."

"When?" he asked.

"Night before last. Friday." Pause. "If you didn't even know he had a wife I suppose you can't be all that good a buddy of his."

"Good buddy wouldn't do it, no."

"And yet you're here."

"But maybe I won't be in an hour from now. You the one who arrested him?"

"Somebody called—around 10:00 P.M. it was—saying there'd been murder done, so I drove out to the Beauvance place and found them."

"What do you mean by 'somebody'? And what do you mean by 'them'?"

"Couldn't identify the voice."

"In this town there's a voice you couldn't identify?"

"Disguised. Handkerchief over the mouth probably. 'Them' was Ella with a bullet in her brain from her own twenty-two. And the widower, drunk and passed out on his living-room sofa. About that disguised voice?"

"Yes?"

"Could have been a man's, could have been a woman's." Pause. "Could have been the widower's."

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"You mean he could have killed her, phoned you, then got himself tanked so's you'd go off tracking in a different direction."

"That's what I mean sure enough."

He nodded. "How long had she been dead?"

"Couple or three hours, according to our medical examiner. He got there just after I did."

"Any prints on the gun?"

"Ella's."

He pursed his lips. "How about a lawyer. Does he have one?"

"No."

"No?"

"He doesn't want one, he says. Alton Bradshaw offered but got turned down. Whole bunch of silliness about defending himself. You might as well know, Jack doesn't trust any of us much."

"Who's Alton Bradshaw?"

"A lawyer. A good lawyer. Good enough to defend me any time I might be in trouble. Former attorney general of the state of Florida, that good."

"What else is he?"

"What do you mean, what else?"

He waited, certain there was something. Her body language had been sending messages.

"Once he was Ella's main beau," she said reluctantly. "A long time ago. About ten years ago they were right on to getting engaged."

Sy smiled.

It set off an explosion. "Alton Bradshaw is a straight arrow. He's as honorable—"

"What he is is a homeboy, Sheriff. You've got this radius drawn. Fifty, sixty miles maybe. Inside, seal of approval. Outside—like Jack, like me—Nooo Yawk."

She took a deep breath, holding it long enough for stress management. Sympathetically, he recognized the uncertainties of her temper. Early on, he'd had one like it. But a moment later, though penny-shaped red dots still lingered near her temples, her voice was steady again.

"One way and another, Alton Bradshaw has done more good for this town," she said, as if driving home a lesson, "than anybody who ever lived. You're wrong, Lieutenant. Some people are *not* capable of murder."

"Okay."

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"Maybe everybody who lives in New York is, but not everybody who lives in Cypressville. We don't have mean streets here."

"Okay."

He drew a small black looseleaf book from his pocket and began writing in it.

"There's a couple or three other things you might want to set down," she said stiffly.

He waited.

"Jack says there was a suicide note on the mantel. He says he found it right after he found the body, and that's what started him drinking. And that he just kept on drinking until he passed out. Quote: 'What was so damned important about calling the police? What were *you* going to do, raise Ella from the dead?' That's what he said after I got enough black coffee into him so's he could talk."

"Sounds like the Jack Fitzroy I know. Not the one you know?"

"There wasn't any note."

He gazed at her thoughtfully.

"Hey, mister, I got that wrong. There *was* a note, only I tore it up because I wanted to frame Jack, him being this non-homeboy."

"Suicide," Sy said. "Was that something brand new with her?"

She hesitated. But then she said, "Three months ago I helped bring her in to have her stomach pumped. And there've been other incidents through the years."

"I see."

"No, you don't. She never, ever really came close. Sure, Ella was a one with a craving for attention. And sometimes when she felt she wasn't getting her share she'd play some damn fool game. Like her suicide game, for instance. What she'd do was leave these dramatic notes around followed by some carefully botched-up attempt. But the fact is, all Ella ever really needed was something good in her life, something to focus on besides that leech she was married to. The true fact is, Ella Beauvance had pride and breeding. She was no person to commit suicide."

He studied her. "Have you had psychiatric training, Sheriff?"

She folded her arms but said nothing.

"I guess that answer's no."

She kept silent.

He tapped his notebook. "That about do it?"

"Just a mite more. That was Doc Drummond on the phone when you ambled in, Ella's doctor. He's only back an hour or so from a couple of days fishing, and this was his first chance to give me the

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big news he gave Ella Friday morning, the very day she supposedly knocked herself off."

Sy prepared himself for a bombshell. It came.

"Ella was pregnant. Six weeks along. Was this news that made her happy? You can bet the earth it was. Ecstatic, was Doc's word. Suicide!" Hovering between a sneer and a snort: "That woman was as like to commit suicide as I am to love Nooo Yawk."

Sy made a meaningless note to buy himself some thinking time, then put the book back in his pocket. "Tell me, Sheriff, deep down, do you really think Jack killed her?"

Her gaze was unswerving. "He had the motive, the opportunity, and the heartlessness."

He raised an eyebrow, but before he could speak she said, "You heard me—heartlessness. He'd kill his mother if the old lady got between him and his typewriter."

"Would he kill his child?"

"He didn't know about that."

"You're certain?"

Something flickered across her face, but it was gone before Sy could translate.

"What's ever certain? I'm sure enough," she said.

He waited, but she added nothing to that, and he knew she wasn't going to. "All right, what kind of motive?" he asked.

"My guess is he was about to get bounced for cattin' around with Lizanne Bakersfield, a waitress down at the Alligator Grille. They'd been goin' at it for months, but last Thursday night Ella wandered in there, or came there purposefully, and caught them in a back booth. Bold as brass, the pair of 'em. Okay, so I don't *know* what happened after that. But I'm guessin' Ella told him they were quits, and that he just couldn't stand the thought of losing his cushy room and board. I mean, how was he going to write those precious books of his out there in the cold and starvin' to death."

"So he killed her for her money?"

"He killed her to protect his art, he'd probably say. But, yeah, that's how it shakes down. He killed her for her money."

He restored the notebook to his pocket. "It's all pretty thin, you know."

She kept silent.

"And maybe if he wasn't who he was, you wouldn't have pulled him in that quick."

"You mean if he wasn't Jack Fitzroy?"

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He watched her.

"Y'all sure got that right," she said. "Because if he wasn't Jack Fitzroy I wouldn't have had but two choices. Pull him in, or watch his dust." She opened her desk drawer and took out a large key ring. "Your client's waiting."

"My client?"

"Whatever."

He let her go two or three steps and then said, "You get much homicide in a town this size?"

She stopped and looked at him coldly. "You putting me down, Lieutenant?"

"Just curious."

She nodded. "This is only the second I ever remember."

Something made him ask, "Who was the first?"

"My husband. Three years ago. He was sheriff then. Two fellas on the lam from the city we've been talking about stopped here long enough to blow him away."

"I'm sorry."

She shrugged. "Who isn't?"

He did *not* ask if the murderers had been caught. He was certain he knew.

He followed her through a long corridor and down a flight of steps to the cell block proper. There were six cells, all on one side of another long corridor. It was a jailhouse, after all, Sy thought. It had the dreary smell of alienation shared by jailhouses everywhere. But efforts had been made to keep it habitable. The walls were freshly painted, the floors scrubbed, and the corridor decently lighted.

At the last cell up the line—the others were empty—she stopped. On the cot, blanket to his ears, Jack lay unmoving.

"He's not asleep," she said. "He's pretending. It's his way of not having anything to do with me." She went into one of the empty cells and got him a chair. "Just come on up when you're through," she said.

Jack sat suddenly erect. "And what about me? Can I come on up, too? Sure I can, when you've got my gallows built."

She left without comment. Jack turned to Sy. "It's a ritual murder, honest to God. You don't believe me, I know. You couldn't, but that's what it is just the same. This whole town . . . it wants to sacrifice me . . . it wants to offer me to its angry gods. Me, the stranger, the

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outlander. And I'm scared, Sy. For the first time in my life I'm really scared. They're weird here."

"Okay now, suppose you just relax—"

"God, I'm glad you came. I wasn't sure you would. I mean, I'm not sure I would have for you, but you did come, didn't you? *Didn't* you?" His hand shot through the bars to clutch Sy's bicep. "You're real." Gusty sigh of relief.

"Of course I am."

"I tell you, Sy, I'm spooked. They've got me crazy. The giantess upstairs isn't even the worst of them. She's . . . Have you met Alton yet?"

"No."

"Alton Bradshaw, the town's high Pooh Bah, the richest, coldest, meanest . . . God, how he hates me. He'd like to tie me to the stake and light the pyre himself. He'd . . . Listen to me, I can't stop talking."

But he did, all at once, slumping back as if he had run out of vital fluids. He shut his eyes, his hands hung limply between his knees, but a muscle or a nerve near the corner of his mouth continued to twitch. Sy decided to give him time. And while he did, he studied him.

He'd seen Jack Fitzroy once since Vietnam. Then, too, it had been in a jail—Sy's jail. Drunk and disorderly. Sy had found him there, paid his fine, taken him home, cleaned him up, boarded him for the night. The following morning he'd been gone, no grateful note in his wake.

Studying him now—skinny, red-eyed, unshaven, unshorn, unkempt—Sy experienced the same sense of disorientation he had four years earlier. Again he attributed this to the violence of contrast. Because the Jack Fitzroy he'd known first was a spit-and-polish soldier, closely cropped, jaw firm, back rigid. That was the man who had saved his life, towing his inert six-feet-five hulk—fractured skull and all—shoreward after the crash of their copter. It was a feat that had always struck Sy as bordering on the bizarre, considering the eighty pounds separating their weights and the mile and a half separating the copter from land. And considering, also, that there really hadn't been much chemistry between them, though in a curious wartime way they had learned to trust each other. At least each other's competence.

Since that first jailhouse meeting Sy had read both of Jack's novels—he and the sheriff were two of possibly a hundred who had—and

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thought he understood the transformation. It was a familiar process, the traumatization known as loss of innocence.

Take an impressionable youngster, teach him savagery, and then when at length that became embarrassing to society, hope for the best in terms of reorientation. In most cases adjustments were adequate. In some, of course . . .

The day the copter crashed was early in the war, and Sy never again saw him in Nam. Judging from the books, however, he could guess that Jack had come close to deserting before the pull-out. They were strident, accusatory books—furious at humanity for debasing its own condition. Implacable but committed books—difficult not to respect and a relief to forget. A fanatic's books, in the sense that you knew he'd have died rather than not write them.

Jack opened his eyes. He was calmer now. "Can you help me?"

"What comes first is I have to know what happened."

"Didn't *she* tell you?"

"She'd lie, right? I mean isn't that the point of what you've been saying?"

"Maybe I went overboard a little."

"The whole town isn't against you?"

"It is, but I never thought she was quite as bad as the rest of them."

"Talk," Sy said. "Forget I ever laid eyes on the sheriff. Start by telling me stuff about your wife."

"What kind of stuff? How old and like that? She was thirty."

"Only thirty. Was she pretty?"

"If you like the type."

"What was the type?"

"Very intense, hyper. Dark, thin, small—a waif but with good boobs."

"Didn't *you* like the type?"

"It palled."

"That's frank enough."

"I stink at lying."

"Palled when? I mean how long after you got here."

"Before we got here."

"But you didn't pall?"

"The mystique, Sy. The artist's charisma. With some broads it beats the hell out of money or muscles."

"Where did you meet her?"

"In New York."

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"What was she doing so far from home?"

"What home? She never had a home. She'd been all over the world. That was her pattern. She'd leave here, swearing never to return . . . go to Paris, go to Rome, the Congo, for Pete's sake, get her teeth kicked in by some brute like me, part with a chunk of dough in the process, and then come limping back, swearing never to leave again. But then she would, as soon as the wounds were licked. She hated Philistineville as much as I do. The thing is, she hated every place she ever spent time in."

"I think you're telling me she hated herself."

"Yes. Poor, dumb broad. She *was* dumb, Sy. When she bagged me she had to bring me back here. You know why? To rub their noses in it. She was so dumb she thought they'd care. I mean in Philistineville. I mean that's *dumb*. Ah, listen, I liked her sometimes. Sometimes I liked her a lot. But the fact is, she was wacked up worse than I am."

"Okay, now tell me who killed her."

"She killed herself. The suicide note—"

"What suicide note?"

"The goddam suicide note she left on the mantel, which somebody stole while I was out cold. *That* goddam suicide note."

Watching him carefully, Sy said, "According to the Sheriff it was a dream note."

"Sy, I swear. I saw it, opened it, read it, *then* I got drunk. When I woke up the giantess was bending over me, and the note was gone. Somebody's trying to frame me. Not just somebody. Alton Pooh Bah Bradshaw."

"What did the note say? Do you remember?"

"Of course I remember. God knows, it was short enough. Short and to the point: 'Goodbye. Life is empty, utterly without purpose. Why prolong it?' "

And just like that, there it was, the pearl in the oyster.

Some investigations, Sy knew, were ill-starred from the getgo. And stayed that way as if controlled by infernal forces. You could plan meticulously, take infinite pains, sweat, strain, and still the poltergeists wouldn't let you live. He'd been there. Others, however, were different. With those you could be in the middle of a yawn, or an eye-blink, or looking the wrong way, when all of a sudden wham, bam, thank you, ma'am, your case had jelled whether you deserved it or not. Whether you liked it or not.

"What? What's that look?" Jack demanded.

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"She was pregnant," Sy said. "And sky-high happy about it."

Under the circumstances, Jack did well. He kept his face expressionless. And when he sat down the heaviness could have been the result of simple fatigue—understandable in someone who had been through what he had been over the past couple of days. Only it wasn't, Sy knew.

"You killed her, didn't you?" he said.

Jack's hands wrapped themselves around the bars—white-knuckled, gripping to crush. "You're a nut case," he said. "A wacko. Wouldn't you know it, Jack Fitzroy asks for help, and what does he get? He gets—"

"You thought she was going to boot you out, so you killed her."

"The hell I did. I was with Lizanne Bakersfield until I got home to find Ella dead. And Lizanne will swear to it."

"But she'll be lying."

Jack stared at him, then bounced across the room to snatch a tin cup from the sink. A moment later he was back, rattling it against the bars.

"Donna Mae Gibson, you come down here! I know my rights, and I want this man expelled from—"

"Hey, Jack, consider the irony. It's cosmic, smack down your alley. No *way* Ella would have booted you out. Suddenly life was full. Every kid needs a father, you'd have pointed out to her, and she'd have been a pushover to convince. And then together you could have spent your lives on the care and feeding of the Fitzroy posterity. Plenty of purpose there, right? Too bad you never gave her a chance to tell you her news."

Jack slumped back on the cot, staring at the featureless floor as if it were a tapestry richly woven and permeated with meaning.

"It was a leftover, the suicide note, wasn't it?" Sy said. "Left over from a previous attempt."

Jack's head came up sharply. "Prove it," he said.

Sy kept silent.

"You can't, can you? I'll deny everything, which makes it just your word against mine."

Sy rose and turned to leave.

Jack screamed at him. "You think I had a choice? I didn't. No artist ever does. But how could you know anything about that, pig? Fuzz. Philistine wacko."

Sy looked back at him. He was stretched out on the cot, face down. Were his shoulders shaking? If so, was it laughter? Was it something else? Sy had no way of being sure.

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Sheriff Gibson met him at the head of the staircase. "I heard most of that," she said.

Sy shrugged.

"But he's going to beat it, isn't he?" and then answering her own question: "Sure he is. Guilty as sin, but there's nothing there to nail it down, nothing to convince a jury."

"There might have been," he said. "Only . . ." He let his voice drift.

"Only what?"

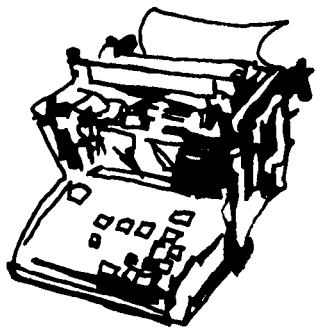
He pantomimed a series of wrenching, ripping gestures, as of paper being torn in many pieces. He kept at it until her face turned bright red.

"That note might have convinced a jury," he said. "It convinced me. But it's gone now, isn't it? You tore it up."

She kept silent.

He smiled bleakly. "Talk about taking the law into your own hands." The smile disappeared. His expression became what he himself would have sworn it was incapable of—harsh, stern, biblically judgmental. "Good cops don't do that," he said.

A moment later he left her, thinking that now he would never see those dimples full power. Somehow, the regret was less sharp than he would have predicted.



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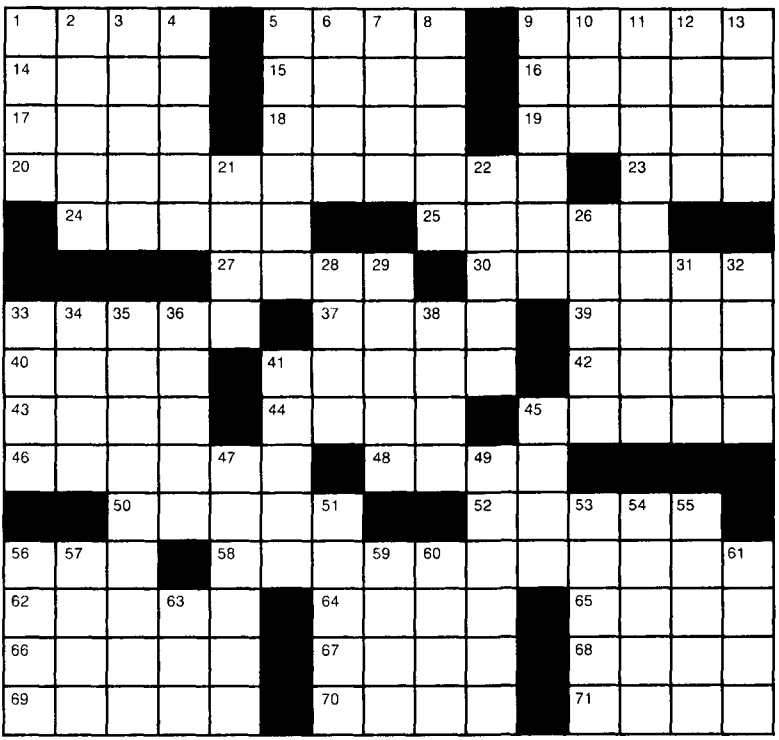
THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

by Ruth Minary



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1 Blind part
5 Ruth's husband
9 Followers of Easter and Christmas
14 Parasitic insects
15 French clerical title
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17 Winglike
18 Ogle
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66 Pertaining to sound quality
67 "Shah _____ (The king is dead), chess victory
68 ". . . . rich without _____," Byron
69 Moriarty to Holmes
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7 But, in Berlin
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10 Actress Lupino
11 *The* _____ *Mystery,* by 58 across in 1931
12 Lamb's alias
13 Arrest
21 Attention to Hans
22 A member of 31 down
26 A part of the puzzle
28 "Sufficient _____ the day is the evil thereof."
29 "_____ Be," Beatles' hit
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34 Homophone for Sparrow's weapon
35 Detective for 20 across
36 _____ Mcpherson, disappearing evangelist
38 In actual fact
41 "Wait _____ Dark," 1966 play
45 M to R
47 Obdurate
49 First of the month?
51 Little and grand in bridge
53 Zephyrs
54 She shares Ms. Street's first name
55 Purport
56 Noble Italian family
57 Collar or school
59 Part of Q.E.D.
60 "Educating _____," Caine film
61 *And Then There Were* _____
63 Aries

EDITOR'S NOTE

We hope you enjoyed our mystery crossword. Such puzzles will become a frequent feature of the magazine if your response is enthusiastic. To express your preference, write to:

The Editors
Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine
380 Lexington Avenue
New York, New York 10168-0035

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an AGATHA CHRISTIE classic

Fifty years ago this autumn, Ellery Queen purchased this Tommy and Tuppence Beresford story for publication in EQMM. *We reprint it in commemoration of Dame Agatha's many splendid contributions to this magazine . . .*

THE SUNNINGDALE MYSTERY

by AGATHA CHRISTIE

"Do you know where we are going to lunch today, Tuppence?"

Mrs. Beresford considered the question.

"The Ritz?" she suggested hopefully.

"Think again."

"That nice little place in Soho?"

"No." Tommy's tone was full of importance. "An A.B.C. shop. This one, in fact."

He drew her deftly inside an establishment of the kind indicated, and steered her to a corner marble-topped table.

"Excellent," said Tommy with satisfaction, as he seated himself. "Couldn't be better."

"Why has this craze for the simple life come upon you?" demanded Tuppence.

"You see, Watson, but you do not observe. I wonder now whether one of these haughty damsels would condescend to notice us? Splendid, she drifts this way. It is true that she appears to be thinking of something else, but doubtless her subconscious mind is functioning busily with such matters as ham and eggs and pots of tea. Chop and fried potatoes, please, Miss, and a large coffee, a roll and butter, and a plate of tongue for the lady."

The waitress repeated the order in a scornful tone, but Tuppence leant forward suddenly and interrupted her.

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"No, not a chop and fried potatoes. This gentleman will have a cheesecake and a glass of milk."

"A cheesecake and a milk," said the waitress with even deeper scorn, if that were possible. Still thinking of something else, she drifted away again.

"That was uncalled for," said Tommy coldly.

"But I'm right, aren't I? You are the Old Man in the Corner? Where's your piece of string?"

Tommy drew a long twisted mesh of string from his pocket, and proceeded to tie a couple of knots in it.

"Complete to the smallest detail," he murmured.

"You made a small mistake in ordering your meal, though."

"Women are so literal-minded," said Tommy. "If there's one thing I hate it's milk to drink, and cheesecakes are always so yellow and bilious looking."

"Be an artist," said Tuppence. "Watch me attack my cold tongue. Jolly good stuff, cold tongue. Now then, I'm all ready to be Miss Polly Burton. Tie a large knot and begin."

"First of all," said Tommy, "speaking in a strictly unofficial capacity, let me point out this. Business is not too brisk lately. If business does not come to us, we must go to business. Apply our minds to one of the great public mysteries of the moment. Which brings me to the point—the Sunningdale Mystery."

"Ah!" said Tuppence, with deep interest. "The Sunningdale Mystery!"

Tommy drew a crumpled piece of newspaper from his pocket and laid it on the table.

"That is the latest portrait of Captain Sessle as it appeared in the *Daily Leader*."

"Just so," said Tuppence. "I wonder someone doesn't sue these newspapers sometimes. You can see it's a man and that's all."

"When I said the Sunningdale Mystery, I should have said the so-called Sunningdale Mystery," went on Tommy rapidly. "A mystery to the police perhaps, but not to an intelligent mind."

"Tie another knot," said Tuppence.

"I don't know how much of the case you remember," continued Tommy quietly.

"All of it," said Tuppence, "but don't let me cramp your style."

"It was just over three weeks ago," said Tommy, "that that gruesome discovery was made on the famous golf links. Two members of the club who were enjoying an early round were horrified to find the

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body of a man lying face downwards on the seventh tee. Even before they turned him over they had guessed him to be Captain Sessle, a well-known figure on the links, and who always wore a golf coat of a peculiarly bright blue colour.

"Captain Sessle was often seen out on the links early in the morning practising, and it was thought at first that he had been suddenly overcome by some form of heart disease. But examination by a doctor revealed the sinister fact that he had been murdered, stabbed to the heart with a significant object, *a woman's hatpin*. He was also found to have been dead at least twelve hours.

"That put an entirely different complexion on the matter, and very soon some interesting facts came to light. Practically the last person to see Captain Sessle alive was his friend and partner, Mr. Hollaby of the Porcupine Assurance Company, and he told his story as follows:

"Sessle and he had played a round earlier in the day. After tea the other suggested that they should play a few more holes before it got too dark to see. Hollaby assented. Sessle seemed in good spirits, and was in excellent form. There is a public footpath that crosses the links, and just as they were playing up to the sixth green Hollaby noticed a woman coming along it. She was very tall and dressed in brown, but he did not observe her particularly and Sessle, he thought, did not notice her at all.

"The footpath in question crosses in front of the seventh tee," continued Tommy. "The woman had passed along this, and was standing at the farther side, as though waiting. Captain Sessle was the first to reach the tee, as Mr. Hollaby was replacing the pin in the hole. As the latter came towards the tee, he was astonished to see Sessle and the woman talking together. As he came nearer, they both turned abruptly, Sessle calling over his shoulder: 'Shan't be a minute.'

"The two of them walked off side by side, still deep in earnest conversation. The footpath there leaves the course, and passing between two narrow hedges of neighbouring gardens, comes out on the road to Windlesham.

"Captain Sessle was as good as his word. He reappeared within a minute or two, much to Hollaby's satisfaction, as two other players were coming up behind them, and the light was failing rapidly. They drove off, and at once Hollaby noticed that something had occurred to upset his companion. Not only did he foozle his drive badly, but his face was worried, and his forehead creased in a big frown. He

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hardly answered his companion's remarks, and his golf was atrocious. Evidently something had occurred to put him completely off his game.

"They played that hole and the eighth, and then Captain Sessle declared abruptly that the light was too bad and that he was off home. Just at that point there is another of those narrow 'slips' leading to the Windlesham road, and Captain Sessle departed that way, which was a shortcut to his home, a small bungalow on the road in question. The other two players came up, a Major Barnard and Mr. Lecky, and to them Hollaby mentioned Captain Sessle's sudden change of manner. They also had seen him speaking to the woman in brown, but had not been near enough to see her face. All three men wondered what she could have said to upset their friend to that extent.

"They returned to the clubhouse together, and as far as was known at the time, were the last people to see Captain Sessle alive. The day was a Wednesday and on Wednesdays cheap tickets to London are issued. The man and wife who ran Captain Sessle's small bungalow were up in town according to custom, and did not return until the late train. They entered the bungalow as usual, and supposed their master to be in his room asleep. Mrs. Sessle, his wife, was away on a visit.

"The murder of the captain was a nine days' wonder. Nobody could suggest a motive for it. The identity of the tall woman in brown was eagerly discussed, but without result. The police were, as usual, blamed for their supineness—most unjustly as time was to show. For a week later, a girl called Doris Evans was arrested and charged with the murder of Captain Anthony Sessle.

"The police had had little to work upon. A strand of fair hair caught in the dead man's fingers, and a few threads of flame-coloured wool caught on one of the buttons of his blue coat. Diligent inquiries at the railway station and elsewhere had elicited the following facts:

"A young girl dressed in a flame-coloured coat and skirt had arrived by train that evening about seven o'clock, and had asked the way to Captain Sessle's house. The same girl had reappeared at the station, two hours later. Her hat was awry and her hair tousled, and she seemed in a state of great agitation. She inquired about the trains back to town, and was continually looking over her shoulder as though afraid of something.

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"Our police force is in many ways very wonderful. With this slender evidence to go upon, they managed to track down the girl, and identify her as one Doris Evans. She was charged with murder, and cautioned that anything she might say would be used against her, but she nevertheless persisted in making a statement, and this statement she repeated again in detail, without any substantial variation, at the subsequent proceedings.

"Her story was this. She was a typist by profession, and had made friends one evening, in a cinema, with a well-dressed man who declared he had taken a fancy to her. His name, he told her, was Anthony, and he suggested that she should come down to his bungalow at Sunningdale. She had no idea then, or at any other time, that he had a wife. It was arranged between them that she should come down on the following Wednesday—the day, you will remember, when the servants would be absent and his wife away from home. In the end, he told her his full name was Anthony Sessle and gave her the name of his house.

"She duly arrived at the bungalow on the evening in question, and was greeted by Sessle, who had just come in from the links. Though he professed himself delighted to see her, the girl declared that from the first his manner was strange and different. A half-acknowledged fear sprang up in her, and she wished fervently that she had not come.

"After a simple meal which was all ready and prepared, Sessle suggested going out for a stroll. The girl consenting, he took her out of the house, down the road, and along the 'slip' onto the golf course. And then suddenly, just as they were crossing the seventh tee, he seemed to go completely mad. Drawing a revolver from his pocket, he brandished it in the air, declaring that he had come to the end of his tether.

" 'Everything must go! I'm ruined—done for. And you shall go with me. I shall shoot you first—then myself. They will find our bodies here in the morning side by side—together in death.'

"And so on—a lot more. He had hold of Doris Evans by the arm and she, realizing she had to do with a madman, made frantic efforts to free herself, or failing that to get the revolver away from him. They struggled together, and in that struggle he must have torn out a piece of her hair and got the wool of her coat entangled on a button.

"Finally, with a desperate effort, she freed herself, and ran for her life across the golf links, expecting every minute to be shot down with a revolver bullet. She fell twice—tripping over the heather,

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but eventually regained the road to the station and realised that she was not being pursued.

"That is the story that Doris Evans tells—and from which she has never varied. She strenuously denies that she ever struck at him with a hatpin in self-defence—a natural enough thing to do under the circumstances, though—and one which may well be the truth. In support of her story, a revolver has been found in the furze bushes near where the body was lying. It had not been fired.

"Doris Evans has been sent for trial, but the mystery still remains a mystery. If her story is to be believed, who was it who stabbed Captain Sessle? The other woman, the tall woman in brown whose appearance so upset him? So far no one has explained her connection with the case. She appears out of space, suddenly, on the footpath across the links, she disappears along the slip, and no one ever hears of her again. Who was she? A local resident? A visitor from London? If so, did she come by car or by train? There is nothing remarkable about her except her height; no one seems to be able to describe her appearance. She could not have been Doris Evans, for Doris Evans is small and fair, and moreover was only just then arriving at the station."

"The wife?" suggested Tuppence. "What about the wife?"

"A very natural suggestion. But Mrs. Sessle is also a small woman, and besides, Mr. Hollaby knows her well by sight, and there seems no doubt that she was really away from home. One further development has come to light. The Porcupine Assurance Company is in liquidation. The accounts reveal the most daring misappropriation of funds. The reasons for Captain Sessle's wild words to Doris Evans are now quite apparent. For some years past, he must have been systematically embezzling money. Neither Mr. Hollaby nor his son had any idea of what was going on. They are practically ruined.

"The case stands like this. Captain Sessle was on the verge of discovery and ruin. Suicide would be a natural solution, but the nature of the wound rules that theory out. Who killed him? Was it Doris Evans? Was it the mysterious woman in brown?"

Tommy paused, took a sip of milk, made a wry face, and bit cautiously at the cheesecake.

"Of course," murmured Tommy, "I saw at once where the hitch in this particular case lay, and just where the police were going astray."

"Yes?" said Tuppence eagerly.

Tommy shook his head sadly.

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"I wish I did. Tuppence, it's dead easy being the Old Man in the Corner up to a certain point. But the solution beats me. Who did murder the beggar? I don't know."

He took some more newspaper cuttings out of his pocket.

"Further exhibits. Mr. Hollaby. His son. Mrs. Sessle. Doris Evans."

Tuppence pounced on the last, and looked at it for some time.

"She didn't murder him, anyway," she remarked at last. "Not with a hatpin."

"Why this certainty?"

"A Lady Molly touch. She's got bobbed hair. Only one woman in twenty uses hatpins nowadays, anyway—long hair or short. Hats fit tight and pull on—there's no need for such a thing."

"Still, she might have had one by her."

"My dear boy, we don't keep them as heirlooms! What on earth should she have brought a hatpin down to Sunningdale for?"

"Then it must have been the other woman, the woman in brown."

"I wish she hadn't been tall. Then she could have been the wife. I always suspect wives who are away at the time and so couldn't have had anything to do with it. If she found her husband carrying on with that girl, it would be quite natural for her to go for him with a hatpin."

"I shall have to be careful, I see," remarked Tommy.

But Tuppence was deep in thought and refused to be drawn.

"What were the Sessles like?" she asked suddenly. "What sort of things did people say about them?"

"As far as I can make out, they were very popular. He and his wife were supposed to be devoted to one another. That's what makes the business of the girl so odd. It's the last thing you'd have expected of a man like Sessle. He was an ex-soldier, you know. Came into a good bit of money, retired, and went into this insurance business. The last man in the world, apparently, whom you would have suspected of being a crook."

"Is it absolutely certain that he was the crook? Couldn't it have been the other two who took the money?"

"The Hollabys? They say they're ruined."

"Oh! They say! Perhaps they've got it all in a bank under another name. I put it foolishly, I daresay, but you know what I mean. Suppose they'd been speculating with the money for some time, unbeknownst to Sessle, and lost it all. It might be jolly convenient for them that Sessle died just when he did."

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Tommy tapped the photograph of Mr. Hollaby senior with his fingernail.

"So you're accusing this respectable gentleman of murdering his friend and partner? You forget that he parted from Sessle on the links in full view of Barnard and Lecky, and spent the evening in the Dormy House. Besides, there's the hatpin."

"Bother the hatpin," said Tuppence impatiently. "That hatpin, you think, points to the crime having been committed by a woman?"

"Naturally. Don't you agree?"

"No. Men are notoriously old-fashioned. It takes them ages to rid themselves of preconceived ideas. They associate hatpins and hairpins with the female sex, and call them 'women's weapons.' They may have been in the past, but they're both rather out of date now. Why, I haven't had a hatpin or hairpin for the last four years."

"Then you think—?"

"That it was a *man* killed Sessle. The hatpin was used to make it seem a woman's crime."

"There's something in what you say, Tuppence," said Tommy slowly. "It's extraordinary how things seem to straighten themselves out when you talk a thing over."

Tuppence nodded.

"Everything must be logical—if you look at it the right way. And remember what Marriot once said about the amateur point of view—that it had the *intimacy*. We know something about people like Captain Sessle and his wife. We know what they're likely to do—and what they're not likely to do. And we've each got our special knowledge."

Tommy smiled.

"You mean," he said, "that you are an authority on what people with bobbed and shingled heads are likely to have in their possession, and that you have an intimate acquaintance with what wives are likely to feel and do?"

"Something of the sort."

"And what about me? What is my special knowledge? Do husbands pick up girls, et cetera?"

"No," said Tuppence gravely. "You know the course—you've been on it—not as a detective, searching for clues, but as a golfer. You know about golf, and what's likely to put a man off his game."

"It must have been something pretty serious to put Sessle off his game. His handicap's two, and from the seventh tee on he played like a child, so they say."

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"Who say?"

"Barnard and Lecky. They were playing just behind him, you remember."

"That was after he met the woman—the tall woman in brown. They saw him speaking to her, didn't they?"

"Yes—at least—"

Tommy broke off. Tuppence looked up at him, and was puzzled. He was staring at the piece of string in his fingers, but staring with the eyes of one who sees something very different.

"Tommy—what is it?"

"Be quiet, Tuppence. I'm playing the sixth hole at Sunningdale. Sessle and old Hollaby are holing out on the sixth green ahead of me. It's getting dusk, but I can see that bright blue coat of Sessle's clearly enough. And on the footpath to the left of me there's a woman coming along. She hasn't crossed from the Ladies' Course—that's on the right—I should have seen her if she had done so. And it's odd I *didn't see her on the footpath before—from the fifth tee, for in*stance."

He paused.

"You said just now I knew the course, Tuppence. Just behind the sixth tee, there's a little hut or shelter made of turf. Anyone could wait in there until—the right moment came. They could change their appearance there. I mean—tell me, Tuppence, this is where your special knowledge comes in again—would it be very difficult for a man to look like a woman, and then change back to being a man again? Could he wear a skirt over plus fours, for instance?"

"Certainly he could. The woman would look a bit bulky, that would be all. A longish brown skirt, say, a brown sweater of the kind both men and women wear, and a woman's felt hat with a bunch of side curls attached each side. That would be all that was needed—I'm speaking, of course, of what would pass at a distance, which I take to be what you are driving at. Switch off the skirt, take off the hat and curls, and put on a man's cap, which you can carry rolled up in your hand, and there you'd be—back as a man again."

"And the time required for the transformation?"

"From woman to man, a minute and a half at the outside, probably a good deal less. The other way about would take longer, you'd have to arrange the hat and curls a bit, and the skirt would stick getting it on over the plus fours."

"That doesn't worry me. It's the time for the first that matters. As I tell you, I'm playing the sixth hole. The woman in brown has

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reached the seventh tee now. She crosses it and waits. Sessle in his blue coat goes towards her. They stand together a minute, and then they follow the path round the trees out of sight. Hollaby is on the tee alone. Two or three minutes pass. I'm on the green now. The man in the blue coat comes and drives off, foozling badly. The light's getting worse. I and my partner go on. Ahead of us are those two, Sessle slicing and topping and doing everything he shouldn't do. At the eighth green, I see him stride off and vanish down the slip. What happened to him to make him play like a different man?"

"The woman in brown—or the man, if you think it was a man."

"Exactly, and where they were standing—out of sight, remember, of those coming after them—there's a deep tangle of furze bushes. You could thrust a body in there, and it would be pretty certain to lie hidden until the morning."

"Tommy! You think it was *then*— But someone would have heard—"

"Heard what? The doctors agreed death must have been instantaneous. I've seen men killed instantaneously in the War. They don't cry out as a rule—just a gurgle, or a moan—perhaps just a sigh, or a funny little cough. Sessle comes towards the seventh tee, and the woman comes forward and speaks to him. He recognizes her perhaps, as a man he knows masquerading. Curious to learn the why and wherefore, he allows himself to be drawn along the footpath out of sight. One stab with the deadly hatpin as they walk along. Sessle falls—dead. The other man drags his body into the furze bushes, strips off the blue coat, then sheds his own skirt and the hat and curls. He puts on Sessle's well-known blue coat and cap, and strides back to the tee. Three minutes would do it. The others behind can't see his face, only the peculiar blue coat they know so well. They never doubt that it's Sessle—*but he doesn't play Sessle's brand of golf.* They all say he played like a different man. Of course he did. He *was* a different man."

"But—"

"Point number two. His action in bringing the girl down there was the action of *a different man.* It wasn't Sessle who met Doris Evans at a cinema and induced her to come down to Sunningdale. It was a man *calling* himself Sessle. Remember, Doris Evans wasn't arrested until a fortnight after the crime. *She never saw the body.* If she had, she might have bewildered everyone by declaring that that wasn't the man who took her out on the golf links that night and spoke so wildly of suicide. It was a carefully laid plot. The girl

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invited down for Wednesday when Sessle's house would be empty, then the hatpin which pointed to its being a woman's doing. The murderer meets the girl, takes her to the bungalow and gives her supper, then takes her out on the links and when he gets to the scene of the crime, brandishes his revolver and scares the life out of her. Once she has taken to her heels, all he has to do is to pull out the body and leave it lying on the tee. The revolver he chucks into the bushes. Then he makes a neat parcel of the skirt and hat and—now I admit I'm guessing—in all probability walks to Woking, which is only about six or seven miles away, and goes back to town from there."

"Wait a minute," said Tuppence. "There's one thing you haven't explained. What about Hollaby?"

"Hollaby?"

"Yes. I admit that the people behind couldn't have seen whether it was really Sessle or not. But you can't tell me that the man who was playing with him was so hypnotized by the blue coat that he never looked at his face."

"My dear old thing," said Tommy. "That's just the point. Hollaby knew all right. You see, I'm adopting your theory—that Hollaby and his son were the real embezzlers. The murderer's got to be a man who knew Sessle pretty well—knew, for instance, about the servants being always out on a Wednesday, and that his wife was away. And also someone who was able to get an impression of Sessle's latchkey. I think Hollaby Junior would fulfill all these requirements. He's about the same age and height as Sessle, and they were both clean-shaven men. Doris Evans probably saw several photographs of the murdered man reproduced in the papers, but as you yourself observed—one can just see that it's a man and that's about all."

"Didn't she ever see Hollaby in court?"

"The son never appeared in the case at all. Why should he? He had no evidence to give. It was old Hollaby, with his irreproachable alibi, who stood in the limelight throughout. Nobody has even bothered to inquire what the son was doing that particular evening."

"It all fits in," admitted Tuppence. She paused a minute, and then asked: "Are you going to tell all this to the police?"

"I don't know if they'd listen."

"They'd listen all right," said an unexpected voice behind him.

Tommy swung round to confront Inspector Marriot. The Inspector was sitting at the next table. In front of him was a poached egg.

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"Often drop in here to lunch," said Inspector Marriot. "As I was saying, we'll listen all right—in fact I've been listening. I don't mind telling you that we've not been quite satisfied all along over those Porcupine figures. You see, we've had our suspicions of those Hollabys. But nothing to go upon. Too sharp for us. Then this murder came, and that seemed to upset all our ideas. But thanks to you and the lady, sir, we'll confront young Hollaby and Doris Evans and see if she recognizes him. I rather fancy she will. That's a very ingenious idea of yours about the blue coat. I'll see that Blunt's Brilliant Detectives get the credit for it."

"You *are* a nice man, Inspector Marriot," said Tuppence gratefully.

"We think a lot of you two at the Yard," replied that stolid gentleman. "You'd be surprised. If I may ask you, sir, what's the meaning of that piece of string?"

"Nothing," said Tommy, stuffing it into his pocket. "A bad habit of mine. As to the cheesecake and the milk—I'm on a diet. Nervous dyspepsia. Busy men are always martyrs to it."

"Ah!" said the detective. "I thought perhaps you'd been reading—well, it's of no consequence."

But the inspector's eyes twinkled.

WRITTEN MOUSETRAPS

by DONALD A. YATES

Among the pleasures of the reading game,
Going far beyond the passive joys of prose,
Are certain tales concocted by this Dame—
Those thrilling puzzles, Marple's and Poirot's.

High Priestess of the herring that is red
And shielder of the least suspected guy,
Can you, dear Agatha, be really dead?
How can we, seasoned fans, accept this lie?

Recalling all her tricks, we don't forget.
In truth, we readers know she'll often tease.
She bids us all approach her mousetrap, yet

The twists and turns she poses with such ease,
In manner of photographer who's set,
End up with us, amazed, exclaiming: "Jeez!"

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a *NEW* short story by

FLORENCE V. MAYBERRY

Florence Mayberry employs a great range of settings in her fiction—Rome, India, Hong Kong, Reno, London, Israel, and more—though this is not surprising when one learns that she has lived all over the world. In this new story, she envisages a sinister encounter at a remote lake in the Pacific Northwest . . .

THE STRANGER

by FLORENCE V. MAYBERRY

The small outboard motorboat, its blue paint streaked and faded by harsh exposure to weather and water, moved in and out of the deep, narrow cove for the greater part of the day. As though the tall, hunch-shouldered man at its wheel who occasionally stood up when the motor was cut, hands shading eyes to gaze around him, was uncertain where to drop a fish line. Or searching for something, or someone, on the lake's shore.

Earlier in the day this had not troubled Karen, but as afternoon wore on she began to worry about his purpose. He lifted no rod to drop into the fish-rich lake. But if not here for fishing, why hover in this one cove? And if searching, for what or whom? To check out possibility of game? Surely not people, there were no neighboring cabins. Could be deer, these animals often skimmed through the forest that surrounded her property. She saw no gun or fishing rod but one or the other would be lying low in the boat. But if a hunter, why remain in the boat all day?

Karen's studio-cabin was the lone dwelling in this north end of the long cove-indented lake which speared close to the Canadian border. The shores surrounding the cold blue-green water were thick with pine and tamarack, their trunks sheltered by spreading bushes,

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an area little traveled by even hardy vacationers. She had discovered it herself only because of her driving passion to immerse herself in untouched nature, to be alone with it and her need to lock its beauty forever in raw brilliance upon her canvases, no disturbance from the rush and push of people at cross purposes. Here, alone, a kind of exalted moodiness seemed to drop upon the land from the branches of the tall needled trees. She had caught this mood in some of her paintings, brooding, shadowy, here and there a searching, shocking light piercing a haunted forest.

Why would that stranger be searching for whatever in this lonely place? Nothing about him made him seem to be an artist seeking a subject, or fisherman or hunter, or house builder cogitating about a likely building spot. He didn't act like anything. Should she call to him, ask if he was lost, point the way to the town at the far southern end of the lake? The scattered few houses or cabins between her property and the small town some twenty miles to the south were normally inhabited only during the brief summer. Now it was late October. Only she with Lad, her Scottish terrier, remained on this shore. Toward the mountains there could be a few trappers and hunters wintering in until spring. She never saw them.

Even Karen intended to shutter and lock her cabin within the coming two weeks, head back to Seattle and her job as illustrator for an advertising firm, from which she had taken three months' leave. Soon she would pack her car with the paintings produced during those special months, a wrenching departure to leave her retreat. Hopefully its essence had been captured on canvases with which she intended to storm Seattle and Portland galleries. If they had the impact she hoped for, next year she would return to her cabin to live and paint as long as she wished.

She peered once more through the small casement window. The stranger was giving no sign of leaving the cove and the worry that nibbled at her intensified. Fleetingly she wondered if her rapturous enthusiasm over buying this secluded cabin had been foolish, even dangerous. Dangerous for a single female, thirty-three years old, no neighbors to call upon, and not yet, during her introductory summer, able to put in a telephone. What with buying the cabin, the cost of setting up poles to this outlying spot, without neighbors to share the expense, had been beyond her ability to finance. Too, she would soon be leaving, not to return for perhaps a year.

Anyway, too late to fret now. Surely the man would leave soon, go home. The day's cold had sharpened, it would be miserable out in the open.

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She saw the stranger arise in the boat, stand rubbing his hands together, then stare intently at the cabin. He was too distant for his features or expression to be clearly discerned but somehow he had a familiar look. Those slumped shoulders, the sidewise slant of head as he gazed up the slope, pinged a distant ring of memory in her. She struggled to bring it close, tag the figure to a place, an incident. There was nothing unusual about the man, clothes common to this Northwest, outdoors country, sagging jeans, heavy short jacket, plaid shirt, long-billed cap. No beard, no moustache. Long-legged, rangy. Nothing distinctive.

But that furtive slant of the head, the almost boneless slouch, where had she seen that before? Perhaps down in the town, at the general store? Or lounging in the garage where she filled up with gasoline, or at the town dock where she had inquired about renting a boat.

The faint familiarity of the man became a nagging nuisance. She shook her head in irritation against it, her grey eyes dark with growing unease. The terrier, a fey Scotsman, responded to her discomfort by rubbing against her ankle, muttering in his throat. "Lad, that man's been here too long, it's not right him hanging about. I want him to go!" The Scottie tipped his whiskered head, muttered again.

Yes, now she believed she remembered where she had seen the stranger. At the general store, standing by the stove while she talked with the store owner's wife about the problem of bringing in a telephone, an exorbitant cost for a few months' use, the woman agreeing with her. If it was the same man, he could have easily heard her, stored up the information. In this unstructured, almost pioneering setting, the thought of danger never entered her mind.

But it did now and she swiftly began to plan a defense. If the man would sit down again, turn his boat into the open lake, well and good. But if instead he turned the boat toward her dock, made it fast, she and Lad would run for her car, drive to town. And what would she tell them in the town? That a man had been running his boat all day on a public lake that belonged to the state, open to everyone's use, then insist he was a trespasser with evil intentions? *Did he attack you? No, I fled.* What would be the town's reaction? Decide she was a hysterical city greenhorn? Plus being a fool for not having a telephone.

"Leave, leave!" she whispered at the window. "Go away!" The vehemence of the "Go" made the Scottie's tail swing with happy

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anticipation. She added, "Not yet, Lad, the man's still on the lake, he may turn around, leave."

She left the window, added a stick of wood to the old-fashioned cooking range, checked the steaming teakettle kept on it continuously to counteract the dryness of the wood-heated air. Came back to the window, looked for the stranger. Her heart plunged. The boat was rubbing against the dock.

The man's left hand grasped the sawed end of one of the dock's log flooring planks. His right hand clutched a long, slim, dark object close to his right side. Too dark, too broad for a fishing rod. The man laid it on the dock, pulled himself up after it. It was a rifle.

Even in the approaching twilight she could make out the stranger's features: sharp nose, chin slanted into his neck, eyes sunk beneath deep brows. He squinted at the cabin, as though to pierce sight through the barrier of its log walls.

Karen rushed back to the range, banked its fire, closed the stove's drafts. Grabbed a down-filled jacket off a nail by the door, slipped it on, found her purse and car keys, slid the bolt on the front entrance door, called Lad. With the dog at her heels she hurried to the cabin's narrow back door, which opened into a low-ceilinged attached woodshed, its sides stacked with split wood. She locked the door, headed for the small car parked at the foot of the steep, rutted drive which led to the rough county road, grateful she had left the car faced down the drive, no need to back and turn it.

Lad frisked ahead, jumped against the car door.

A rifle shot cracked.

"Lad, heel! Heel!" she screamed.

The dog wheeled, raced back, unhurt.

Two more shots in quick succession. The back tires of the car softened, began to sink.

She jabbed the key at the backdoor lock, missed, jabbed, made contact, opened the door. Ordered the dog inside, started to follow, then turned, picked up the axe beside the chopping block. At least no axe for the stranger to chop his way in after her.

Inside she relocked the door, shoved a chair under its knob, set two empty buckets on it to warn her by their clatter if the door was forced. She looked down at the axe she had dropped to the floor. A weapon for her? She shuddered at the thought.

She picked up the axe, carried it into the main room, dropped it beside the stove. Jammed a chair-back beneath the knob of the bolted front door. Walked to the casement window, cautiously pulled

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its gingham curtains together, peeped through their joining slit.

The stranger, shadowed by nightfall, stood on the dock, rifle half raised, took a few slow steps toward shore. She slid open the window a crack, shouted, "Go away! I have a weapon too! And I'll use it!"

He stepped back, slid over the dock's edge into the boat, hunkered down. He was a coward. A bully and a coward too. But he had a gun. She had only an axe that terrified her.

She kept watching for his next move, now and then a nervous sigh escaping her. Her hand patted her lips against a soundless scream. In the low-ceilinged room, lighted only by the glow shed through the isinglass of the stove's firebox, Karen's oval face became mystic, strangely beautiful, a troubled Modigliani character. The dog rumbled uncertainly, paced from his mistress to the door, back to her. The furniture took on shadowy, unnatural shapes as the dark deepened. But now the moon was rising. Soon it would spill light upon lake, cabin, upon a skulking, approaching figure.

She shivered from the room's increasing chill, went to the stove, opened the damper, fed the firebox more wood. Closed the iron door quickly against the glimmer it cast on the wall.

She contemplated the chance of success if she and Lad again slipped from the back door. After that to dart into the surrounding forest, hike the almost twenty miles in the frosty night to the town, problematically discover a cabin along the way. But under moonlight movement quickly revealed its source. Lad might bark, even rush the intruder, be shot.

To gain better perspective upon movement the man might make, Karen hastened up the short stairway to her slant-roofed attic studio, her low bed on one side under the eaves. Her canvas on its easel to one side of the window gave off ghostly reflected moonlight as she stood beside it to peer toward the dock.

The boat gently rocked at the mooring. It was empty, the man vanished, lost in the night. He could be behind a tree, back of the cabin in the woodshed, anywhere.

She returned downstairs, locked all windows, their panes heavy storm glass difficult to break. But not difficult to shoot out. She checked the chairs bracing the doorknobs. Firm. Then eased into the rocker near the stove, the axe at her feet. Her chair creaked, she stilled it, sat tense and listening.

A brush of movement sounded from the deck, beside the door. A footstep, then a second. The dog barked, plunged against the door and snorted fiercely at the sill.

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The doorknob rattled.

She forced Lad away from the door. A bullet could pierce the wood.

"Hey, sister! You in there, better listen up!" The voice held a raw joviality, as though sharing a common eagerness. "No use tryin' to fool me, you ain't got no gun, or you woulda popped it when I came off the dock. So why get me all riled up when all I'm lookon' for is some good comp'ny 'cause I'm lonesome. Ain't you kinda lonesome too? Way out here all alone, no man."

She clutched the dog closer, remained silent.

Now the voice was eager, confident. "Maybe you think I ain't comin' in after you, then you gotta 'nother thing comin'. Now listen, I don't wanna ruin this door, but I will. Open up like a smart girl, nobody gonna get hurt. Not even that dog if you shut him up somewheres. Just use old common sense, we can have a nice friendly visit, make up to you for all the time you been out here all alone."

Silence.

The voice turned gritty. "You don't open up, I got the gun ready, you better step aside if you don't wanna—"

"Wait! I'm getting the key!" She was remotely shocked to hear her voice clean and strong. She tiptoed to the chair, eased the dog to the floor, whispered, "Stay!" Picked up the axe, returned beside the door, raised the axe.

"Hurry it up!" Arrogance in the voice now, assured. "I said hurry! I'm not kiddin' around, it's freezin' cold out here."

Could she hit fast and hard enough to knock the gun from his grasp, have the stomach to strike into living flesh, wound or kill the marauder? She stood motionless, waiting, scarcely breathing. Into the silence a new sound intruded, soft but insistent, almost like a whispered message. Steam arising from the large old-fashioned iron teakettle on the range performing its duty of humidifying the atmosphere. A sibilant, bubbling response to her silent inner cry for help.

Back at the stove she grasped the kettle's handle, sped upstairs with it, Lad behind her. She crossed the studio to the small window that overlooked the deck, where at one side the waiting man pounded on the door. Above his head was a narrow makeshift roof shielding the cabin's entrance. Other than that the deck was open to sky and weather.

Through the windowpane she could glimpse the stranger's long legs only, his head and upper torso concealed by the flimsy roof. She slid open the window, called, "Here! Up here at the window. Please come closer, there's something I need to ask you before I open the

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door. I don't want to shout, I just want to talk, ask you something, something kind of—well, personal, it might solve all this trouble."

"Yeah?" He sounded doubtful. "So why not just yell it out, we're all alone, who's to care?"

She made her voice coy, hesitant. "I care, I just need to sort of talk, it's, well, very private, I wish I could whisper it. Please, this is difficult for a woman—"

"You got somethin' wrong with you?"—He stepped out of the roof's shadow. "Whyn't you just come on downstairs, open the door, tell me real close?"

"I—I just couldn't, I need to know first how—oh, please—"

He left the shelter, stood beneath the window, looked up. The moon, now risen, put the man and his rifle in clear view. He was close, she could hear his breathing. The rifle raised, both of his hands on it. "Okay, spill it, it better be worth my—"

His last word escalated into a tormented shriek as boiling water spilled over his head, face, hands. Scalded hands let the rifle slip onto the deck as more liquid fire spilled. He jerked backwards, stumbled over the weapon, fell, and began a crablike scramble on elbows and knees to reach shelter under the entry's roof.

"Damn you to hell! Murderin' bitch!" he yelled. "Oh Christ, my eyes! You've blinded me!"

"Kick that gun onto the ground! Else you'll get something worse than boiling water. And I have another weapon that doesn't need bullets, and that a blinded man can't dodge. Plus I'll set the dog on you! So do as I say!"

"I gotta have help, my face is on fire, eyes swelled shut! Oh God!"

He began a cautious backward crawl, feet scooting back and forth across the flooring, met the rifle, kicked it. It spun to the ground.

Karen and the dog hurried downstairs, she opened the entry door, Lad plunged toward the intruder. "Heel!" she ordered. The twenty-pound terrier, outsize white fangs ready and gleaming for business, reluctantly backed away but kept watchful gaze upon the moaning figure.

Karen shut and locked the door behind her. "Stay where you are, don't move! Lad, keep guard, guard him! You better do as I say, this dog doesn't like you." The dog edged closer to the man, growling, trembling with eagerness to be about his job.

Karen jumped off the deck, picked up the rifle, ran to the dock, along its length, flung the gun far into the dark water. Hurried back to the deck, unlocked the door, stepped inside briefly. Called, "Now

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get to your feet, turn toward me, can you open your eyes enough to glimpse me and the door? Okay, come inside and I'll try to help you."

The man awkwardly arose, approached the entry, his puffed hands held limply before him. Karen edged back of the door, her hands gripped behind her on the axe handle. As he stumbled past her she slipped the weapon out of sight beneath the cook range. She lighted an oil lamp, said, "There's a rocking chair just ahead of you to your left. Sit down and I'll see what I can do. Lad, on guard!"

The man sat down, the dog anxiously half-circling the chair.

Swiftly Karen dipped cold water from the bucket on her rough drainboard, filled a deep pan. More gently than she felt she eased off his jacket, lifted the red puffed hands into the water, placed a cold wet cloth across his forehead and eyes. He groaned, more softly, relieved as the water cooled his flesh. She dipped water into a second basin, dropped a clean towel into it, unbuttoned the top button of his shirt, placed the cold wet cloth on the scalded skin of his neck and cheeks. For a long time she did this, dipping the cloth, changing the water, dipping again, the man whimpering under his breath. She was silent.

"Ain't helpin' much, I'm still on fire," he whined. "Hell, you mighta burnt out my eyes, got me blinded for life, you d—" He choked off the remainder of that word but anger snaked in and out of what followed. "You'd oughta knowed I was just talkin', just makin' a little try, woulda done nothin'." His whine rose, "All I was lookin' for was a little comp'ny, don't know nobody around here, folks around here not friendly, just wanted a little—"

"Shut up! Stop lying. Real bullets tore my tires. You threatened me with a gun. So shut up!"

The dog was alerted by the anger in her voice. His lips skinned back from his teeth, a growl rumbled in his throat, and the man shrank against the chair. "Keep that dog away from me, my right leg's scalded too up on the thigh. I could stand cold water there too if I could get my pants down." The petulant whine became sly, "Maybe you could give me a little help, I can't stand no pressure on my hands."

"No!"

"Hey, I didn't mean nothin'. Just anxious, I could get infected way out in this God-forsaken place. No doctor even in that one-horse town, need to get to a bigger place. Listen, you done the scalding, you oughta get me to town. I know a guy at the garage, he might

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could drive me on to a doctor. I hurt bad, you oughta at least get me to town, not have me die out here."

"That's a burn, not a gunshot. And how should I drive you to town? In my car with shot-out tires. Or maybe you can walk it. By yourself."

"Oh God!" He began to tremble, rock back and forth. Sweat gleamed on his face and his shaking increased. "I mean it, I hurt awful. It's stingin' like a thousand matches on me."

She went to a chest beneath the stairway, took out a thick blanket, wrapped it around his shoulders. "There's your boat, I can handle a boat. Maybe in the morning I could run you into town." *(And hand you over to whoever is the town authority, get someone to bring me home with new tires, or fix these.)* "I'm afraid to try the boat at night, especially without lights. Your boat doesn't have lights, does it?"

"No. But maybe you got a big lantern you could fasten in front."

"Too dangerous. The lake has too many deep coves, twists and turns, even floating logs. Easy to get turned around in the dark, spend the night on the lake. Tip over, maybe, get drowned. We need to wait for dawn. And hope it's not raining or snowing by then."

They sat through the night, she on the stairs, awake and watchful, the dog between her and the man who dozed fitfully in the blanketed chair. As the first grey light of morning filtered through the heavy mist hovering over the lake, the blanketed man, the woman, and the dog walked onto the dock, got in the boat. The motor sputtered, coughed, died, caught after several tries. Karen clenched her teeth against a ragged sigh of relief.

The boat chugged out of the cove, turned south, held to the lake's center to avoid submerged logs and the ragged beds of water weeds that grew along the shore.

Perhaps twenty minutes of travel passed, the only sounds that of the motor and the rushing water as the boat skimmed through it, when suddenly a muttered curse and heavy, lurching movement startled her, swung her head about, threw her off balance. She staggered against the wheel, saw that the stranger was braced on elbows against the boat's side, towel-wrapped hands dangling and one leg lowering from what could have been a kick. Lad had vanished.

She cut the throttle, stared into the boat's wake. A small dark object bounced in the wave path. Lad.

She sharply wheeled the boat, fought its rocking, gunned it into the opposite direction. The man's elbows awkwardly jabbed at the boat's sides as he attempted to stand; instead he slid to the boat's

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bottom, yelping with pain. "Damn fool woman! Wreck us for a sona-bitchin' dog! Gonna bite me! Can't half see with swelled-up eyes, musta sent him off wrong way, was gonna bite— Hey, for God's sake, turn around—"

For answer, the boat sped toward the swimming animal. The man, now half bent, half standing, lunged at her, staggered from the boat's bouncing, and pitched sideways into the lake.

The boat held course toward the dog. Reaching him, Karen cut the throttle, stretched over the boat's side, grabbed Lad's ruff, lost hold. Grabbed again, hung on until she grasped his collar, yanked him aboard. He shook himself, coughed, gagged out water.

She turned the boat toward the floundering man, his waterlogged arms splashing at the water. She tossed out the painter. "Grab the rope! Hang onto it! Catch it between your hands, squeeze hard, even if it hurts, you have to! Don't let loose! I'll pull you to the boat, try to lift you in."

With the motor idling, she reached for the man bobbing at the rear of the boat, he grimaced as swathed hands squeezed at the rope. She pulled him close, caught hold of his shoulder. He let go the rope, grappled at her down jacket, his desperation pulling her toward the water. "Let loose! If you pull me in with you I'll never get you out!" She dropped his shoulder, yanked her jacket, but his grasp was tenacious. She braced her feet against it, swiftly unzipped the jacket, shucked it off.

As the man submerged the jacket floated free. He resurfaced, hands flailing to re-contact the rope. She pushed it toward him, he caught it. "This time, hang on, don't drop that rope! I'll pull you to shore. It's impossible to lift you in out here on the lake."

"I'm freezing! The water's like ice!" Chattering teeth, blanched face bore out his statement.

Her jacket gone, she grabbed the blanket the man had dropped before he pitched overboard, threw it about her shoulders, headed the boat toward shore. Now a raw east wind cut from shore to shore and the boat bumped heavily over the lake's cross current. She looked back anxiously at the towed man. Momentarily his white, terrified face lifted to stare at her through the boat's spray.

She moved ahead cautiously, edged into the reed-bound shore, reached a small stretch of muddy beach. "Going in! Hold on!" she yelled. The boat bumped against solid ground, she cut the motor, turned to pull the man to shore.

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The rope was drifting free, curling aimlessly on the water's surface, no weight pulling it downward. She scanned the water, its wave-roughened breadth shadowed by an even more menacing sky. Far out a head bobbed above the lake's surface, an arm reaching up beside it. She restarted the motor, reversed the craft, aimed for the bobbing head.

The head sank, briefly rose. As the boat fought the current, the tiny dark object seemed to flee from the pursuing boat. It sank again.

She forced the boat against the choppy waves, gained the vicinity where the head last surfaced. She made a slow, wide circle, fearful that the injured, chill-paralyzed man might be under the boat, to be sliced by its propeller. Holding onto the wheel, she leaned far over the boat's side, stared helplessly into the storm-darkened water.

A first light sting of snow struck her cheeks. Within minutes the storm could become blinding, driven by wind into tunnels of white-out in which no direction existed.

She lifted the emergency oar, stirred it into the water in an attempt to discover the submerged body. The oar helplessly fought the storm-stressed water. The current had swept the man away. To where on this turbulent lake?

In the distance she glimpsed a dark floating object and her heart leapt. She raced toward it. But it was her own dark blue jacket she had shed. She jabbed for it with the oar but the wind skimmed it beyond capture. She cupped her hands about her mouth, shouted, "Here! Here! Show where you are!"

Only wind and the hiss of snow as it struck against the boat responded. With unreasonable, frantic irritation she thought, *He didn't even tell me his name, I don't even know who he is.*

She searched for him in ever widening circles, then backtracked by narrowing them. No sign, no mark to go by. In a shock of recollection she recalled an overheard conversation at the town's general store between the owner's wife and a woman customer. About an Indian legend of this lake handed down from old times, that this lonely northern lake was jealous of the bodies it claimed for its own. For reasons known only to the Lake Spirit it would release some drowned bodies, but others simply vanished, never to resurface. Some geologists offered the explanation that the lake bed had deep, bottomless holes here and there, cones of ancient submerged volcanoes that sucked those chosen bodies into them. But, said the store owner's wife to the customer, the old-timers clung to the belief that the Lake Spirit was moody and unpredictable, had an affinity and

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yearning for certain lonely souls to match its cold loneliness.

"I'm lonesome," the stranger had told her. Wasn't lonesome the same as lonely? "Ain't you kinda lonesome too, out here all alone?" Did the Lake Spirit go on a rampage today, try for two bodies plus a dog?

"Nonsense!" she shouted into the wind.

She turned the boat again toward the shoreline, straining for a glimpse of the lost white face, silently praying it would suddenly appear caught in the water weeds. The snow had thickened. As the boat moved against its slanting force, the flakes compacted into a blinding white siphon sucking her into an unknown vortex.

Despite her art, her dreams, was she lonely too—did the lake yearn for her?

She left the shore, waves buffeting her progress. Lad huddled at her feet, whined uneasily. She estimated to be roughly fifteen miles north of the town dock, her own property five miles or so north. If she turned back, followed the shore, she might reach home, escape the lake's hunger. The longer southward journey, coupled with the accelerating storm, could divert her into one of the numerous convoluted coves, cause loss of direction, even capsize the boat. If the boat should be beached it would be too far to walk to town for help through the approaching blizzard.

Besides, who would challenge this storm to search for the lost man when even she would be confused as to the location of his disappearance. Too late for the stranger. Hypothermia. Drowned. Lost to the lake.

With the decision to return home came fatalistic relaxation. She became aware of her own body's needs, of the cold, her wet flannel shirt clammy on her flesh, driving chill into her bones. Drawing the blanket close, she headed north.

At her dock she lifted Lad to its top. She brushed aside the dark, snow-weighted bangs that dripped water down her cheeks like tears, followed the dog up the steep bank. Her head throbbed with misery as she struggled to ferret out the mystery of why tragedy had so abruptly entangled two utter strangers. For what purpose? Only to punish the invader? To reveal herself to herself? Her weakness, self-centeredness, foolishness? Even though it had seemed idiocy at the time, should she have jumped into the water after the man, attempted to hold him afloat? No, not that, both would have drowned, pulled beneath the surface by his panic. Could it be that

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the Indians were right, the lake was a mystic entity, greedy for lonely people? Was she lonely, not merely alone?

"Not lonely!" she argued aloud. "I have painting, I have Lad."

In the driveway she knelt beside her car, examined the rear tires. Neat bullet holes punctured them, but the wheels seemed undamaged. Her one spare tire could go on one wheel, but twenty miles on the opposite punctured tire would make a ghastly trip over the storm-gouged county road, now snow-covered.

But the stranger ought to be found soon, pulled from the lake. Shouldn't he? If this storm was the start of an early, hard winter, the lake would freeze the body in the ice.

She looked downhill at the boat tied to the dock. She had two spare cans of gasoline. When, or if, the storm let up she could put gas in the boat's tank, run down to the village, report the whole terrible situation. Start a search.

If the lake froze, and the crippled car proved too difficult, she would have to walk. And after she reached town, then what? The sheriff would come, investigate. Perhaps drag this cove below her cabin to find the rifle she said she had tossed away. Or maybe it too would be claimed by the lake, no evidence left to back up her story. Reporters too, on the scene, keen for intrigue, spicy drama, sending out stories wild with conjecture, *Maybe you led the guy on,* pretty girl out in the woods all alone, maybe lonesome, and the guy came on too strong, scalded him you say, you do play rough, tipping him in the lake—

"Oh God!" she whispered. "What am I into? What shall I do?"

Lad was shaking with cold. He pawed her legs, whined. She led him to the cabin, unlocked the door, put him inside, started to follow. She stopped on the threshold, her head still whirling with conjecture. After a few minutes, she nodded, responding to an inner decision.

She returned to the dock, stepped down into the boat. Ignoring her own chill, methodically she gathered up blanket, purse, all her belongings and placed them on the dock. Then steeled herself to jump into the water, shuddered as it circled her waist, lapped at her breast. She untied the boat, pushed it from the dock, down the cove until the water reached her shoulders. She edged to the rear of the craft, kicked herself and her burden forward.

At the cove's entrance the wind-stressed water wrenched the boat from her grasp and the boat rocked northward on a haphazard path. Karen, dog-paddling, watched it bounce into the distance until,

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shrouded in snow, it vanished. She clenched her jaw to control the chatter of her teeth and swam back to the dock.

She gathered up her belongings, stumbled up the bank to the cabin. Inside, the load dropped from her suddenly nerveless hands, startling Lad, who was curled up beneath the stove. She stared at the scattered articles as though unable to comprehend what they were or where they came from.

"My jacket?" she asked herself weakly. "Where's my jacket?"

Out in the icy water. With the drowned man.

Suppose the jacket is found, tangled with him, in macabre intimacy.

When the storm abates the boat might ricochet from a jutting bank, turn south, float to the town. Or, hopefully, it could break up in the storm, no longer recognizable. Did the stranger own the boat? Or was it rented, its owner eager to find his property and its renter? Was any of what happened real, the stranger, herself, the boat, the gun, any of it, all enveloped in phantasmagoric illusion? Mightn't the body remain disappeared within the lake as illusions should?

Or, dear God, would it turn out completely, even exaggeratedly, real, into a frozen face glaring through the ice as skaters sped over it when the storm abated? Or, most terrible of all, suppose the wind changed direction in the night and drove the body back to its launching place, her dock, to stare at her in the morning with frozen dead eyes. "No, no!" she whispered vehemently.

Inside her mind, silent but equally vehement, came a secret whisper, "Yes, yes, perhaps." She shrugged, helpless before the mystery of fate.

In an effort to regain normality, she built up the fire. As she stood beside the warming stove peeling off wet clothes, she faced the fact of two strangers. The man. And the woman beside the stove uselessly trying to drive out the deep chill she had discovered within herself.

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Secrets revealed in the confessional have long suggested possibilities to crime writers. But in the hands of Francis Lyall, the subject gets a new twist . . .

CONFESSIONAL

by FRANCIS LYALL

"Bless me, Father." The familiar words came through the wooden grille. Father Anthony sighed and shifted his corpulent frame into a more comfortable position.

—It was uncomfortably hot. Pity he had had to hurry for Confession. But he couldn't not be there in time. He tried to slow his heartbeat and gave his attention to the voice.

—Memory had not played false. The mincing footsteps had been those of the leader of the choir of St. Mark's. Once again he would have to overcome his irritation at the namby-pamby mannerisms of the man, and his unctuous delivery of the most inane of observations.

—Why, O God, have you thus burdened me? The thought passed across Father Anthony's mind for the umpteenth time. If there is a God, he cautiously added.

And yet, he knew the answer to his question. He put up with Maurice because Maurice's aunt was Mrs. Russell, the late and now perpetual mainstay of the congregation's finances.

—Though maybe now the time had come for a change of choir leader . . . ?

—It would be possible. For Mrs. Russell could hardly take offence now.

He smiled.

"For I have sinned."

—Have you now? thought the priest, wondering what staggeringly banal catalogue would be forthcoming. In the past Maurice Hodge had found himself suffering from the demon of jealousy, *et separatim* that of envy (a distinction the priest found difficult), had stolen from his fellow citizens by travelling on the Tube without

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paying, and—horror of horrors—had occasionally found a lascivious thought crossing his mind. Father Anthony even remembered Maurice confessing to a surge of anger during a Sunday service at the memory of a high E flat missed by the soloist months before—a feat quite worthy of Proust. Whether Maurice had confessed the original anger, he could not recall.

Trivia! But what irritated the priest most was that Maurice's sins were never presented cleanly filleted from the flesh of life. His technique was to rehearse in detail all he had done or felt since his last confession.

Father Anthony shifted again, suppressing a sigh.

—What was the hallowed old formula? "Are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin"?

"Yes, my son," he said through the grille, and threw his mind into neutral. Maurice's intonation would betray when the priest should return his full attention to what was being said.

From where Father Anthony sat he could see up into the roof of the church. There the side-column of the tower and the cross-aisle rose spaciously, more spaciously than any mere church had any right to.

—God, it was warm! He could do with a drink.

The beauties of the building enfolded him again. Not for nothing had Pevsner described his church as a miniature cathedral. John Betjeman had thought it a jewel, and the local planning authority was more than polite about it when they had listed it.

It had been a struggle. But now, thanks to Maurice's aunt, the church was secure at least during the remaining years of his tenure, of his life, indeed, for no one would move him now, not at his age.

He shifted again.

It was hot. He mopped his brow and brought his attention back to the matter in hand—Maurice had gone to the local football match on Saturday, and had allowed himself to be provoked by the language and antics of some of the visiting spectators. He had said nothing, but wasn't the thought as bad as the deed itself?

Father Anthony reassured him, his lips curling with amusement. What would Maurice say if he knew . . . But then he himself was the only one who knew. And how many had entrusted their secrets to him? He, the Church, provided the sewer, the garbage disposal service, the rubbish tip into which all their sins could be off-loaded and forgotten about.

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Confession is good for the soul! How fortunate it is that some can act as conduits for the guilt of others. And he was such a one.

That was his forte. Nothing could shock him—not after so many years in the business. Oh, he might later marvel at how Henry Golightly could greet people at the church door knowing he had swindled them at his garage, or that Katherine Sellings could be so friendly with her lover's wife.

—But it would all work out. If he himself just kept things going, kept people in harmony with themselves and with their fellows, it would all work out. After all, that was all there was to it. Modern theologians had shown that back of the Faith was nothing substantial. Religion was merely a means of social interaction and psychic solace. That was enough to bother about. He heaved a sigh.

—It was airless in the box. Still, he would soon be able to get a better box built.

Now what was Maurice saying?

—Ah, irritation at a surly booking clerk at the railway station when he was renewing his season ticket. Maurice hadn't heard there'd been a fare increase and had sought, very properly no doubt, to complain.

Father Anthony fell again to musing.

The beloved building was all about him. If he moved just a little, he could see more of the high vaulting at the intersection of the nave and cross-aisles. There. Up there where the trouble was. Those weakened Victorian pillars. The rot! But now it was all going to be fixed, thanks to Mrs. Russell.

Her funeral had been a melancholy occasion—for her grieving nephew. But it was better for the old soul that she was away. Life had been no pleasure to her since her stroke. Her once lively mind had at first raged against its imprisonment, but then she had gone apathetic.

Maurice Hodge finished. Mechanically Father Anthony gave words of comfort and imposed the small routine penalties that did most for the psyche of his kind. And then Maurice was gone.

Father Anthony waited. Someone just might come along almost at "closing time." Some people seemed to treat Confession like a pub, dashing in for a quick one before the place shut for the night. "A quick one."

—How he himself would relish a glass of brandy. Still . . . soon . . .

—How much would the estate be?

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The £50,000 would see Maurice all right. Beyond that very proper bequest, the whole "rest, residue, and remainder" of the estate had been left to St. Mark's—and he himself in effect would have the disposal of it. He had made sure of that! Some years ago when Mrs. Russell had discussed the arrangements she was making, he had been gratified. She had asked him to speak to the solicitor for her, and old Henry Williams had done as instructed. He had seen the will. He had questioned Williams. It was watertight. He had not acted as witness, nor would he be executor. Nor, technically, was he a beneficiary.

He had been gratified then. Now he was ecstatic. In the intervening years all three of her sisters had died, each leaving their capacious estates to their younger sister.

—Something wrong with that family! Four daughters, well-married, and yet none had produced an heir. Extraordinary! Maybe something in their genes? He certainly wasn't going to see it as an act of God, a judgment, or anything silly like that. Indeed, he didn't even see the provision now made for his church steeple as an act of divine intervention.

It was almost a pity that Maurice existed. Perhaps he had been too generous in his suggestion of the figure for that legacy. But it was enough to keep Maurice quiet. Just as well, though, that Korea had seen the end of that brother, as Dunkirk had seen the end of the father. The brother might have spawned a set of nephews and nieces for the old lady and then maybe Mrs. Russell might not have been so willing to frame her will as he had suggested. The effete Maurice was no competition. Others might have been.

—How much would the house fetch? It was a wonderful old place, with its half-timbered russet brick. And the creepers. He thought of it fondly.

—Might he be able to retain it as a residence?—for St. Mark's, of course. So much more suitable than the draughty pile that a predecessor had accepted.

—He must drop a word in certain ears. The proposal must come from the right quarters. It mustn't be thought that he was looking after himself.

—Maybe in strict architectural purity it was a pity that some Victorian owner had created those patio doors. But he disagreed. It would be charming to sit and gaze out over the lawn to the flower beds and the lilacs.

He lost himself in pleasurable anticipation.

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* * *

He had done his best for the old soul. She would have been shocked to have been buried in unconsecrated ground—so he had made the arrangements without reference to the bishop. That young fool would accept that he felt it was his "pastoral duty" under the circumstances. But it was a pity that despite the coroner's normal generosity, she would be classed as a suicide in the public mind.

—Poor Maurice. He would take that hard. Poor Maurice. Especially since it wasn't true. That was why he had swiftly agreed to Maurice's half hints that, perhaps, under the circumstances . . . balance of the mind . . .

He found himself sweating in the confined chamber. Really, it was too bad that he had to dress up in a cassock to sit in a wooden box on a warm summer's evening. But that was what the parishioners expected, and he was willing to comply with their minor expectations—the game is worth the candle; Paris is worth a Mass.

A golden beam lanced down from the wheel window as the sun proceeded across the sky.

—How apt, he thought. Somehow there were truths about life to be known. Mind you, they were all on the level of fairy stories, but how powerful fairy stories were in training to adult behaviour and in grappling with the dark uncertainties of life. A beam of light. Fairy tales.

—What was the name of the man again . . . ? Bettelheim. That was it. He had shed such light on fairy stories, and, for Anthony, also on the rude tales of the Jews and those first-century zealots who had fashioned their beliefs into a faith that had spread throughout the world.

But Mithras, of Persian myth, had also known a thing or two. His own reading had convinced him of that. Only because the Christians had got to Constantine first had Christianity succeeded and Mithras declined. But what did it matter? All faiths led to the same source. The end justifies all means.

—Bettelheim—ah yes. Bettelheim. The survivor of the Holocaust had eventually suffocated himself when he could no longer stand the strain and was lying disabled in bed. Funny how many who escaped disaster eventually found survival intolerable.

How could he have had the strength to put a plastic bag over his head and leave it there? Or had he held it there, doggedly? What had gone through his mind? What had he felt?

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What had Mrs. Russell felt? It had taken great strength of purpose.

He felt himself grow warm again.

Feet approached. Purposeful feet. He did not recognise them.

Someone knelt at the grille.

"Father Anthony?"

"Yes?"

This was not the normal approach. Didn't the fellow know how to conduct himself at Confession? He could not place the voice.

"A week ago it was a beautiful evening."

—Indeed it had been. Mrs. Russell's home help had left her as usual sitting at the patio doors. She was sitting there when he came in with the geranium in its bag.

"I went out for a walk."

—So did I, thought Father Anthony.

"I hadn't really decided where to go."

—I had.

"Or what to do."

—I had. His breath quickened. I took that geranium in that plastic bag. I put that occasional table close to her good hand and took the plant out of the bag and put it on the table.

"I had a lot to think about."

—So had I. We'd had that dreadful news about the likely expense for that damned spire, and the rot high in the roof. And the organ is starting to go. And the bishop had said that there were no central funds available. Malevolent fool! Jealous of my independence.

He felt uncomfortable.

"I had an impulse. I went along Chestnut Row."

—I took that plastic bag and . . .

"And went in to visit my old friend Mrs. Russell."

Father Anthony suddenly felt clammy. His warmth had gone to a chill cold. He should say something, but words failed.

"I went in through the garden. Through the lilacs."

—But I didn't see anyone. But then maybe I wouldn't have. I was busy. She struggled. With her good hand.

He ran his thumb over the scratches on his own.

"There was someone there. Standing behind her. I've just realised that it could be important."

Silence.

"For the inquest."

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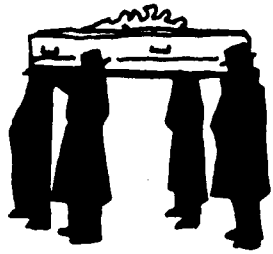
Silence, then a choking sound as he tried to breathe.
"Father Anthony?"
More silence.
"Father Anthony?"

Footsteps running.
"Someone! Someone come quick. Father Anthony's ill."
The voice faded along with his hearing.



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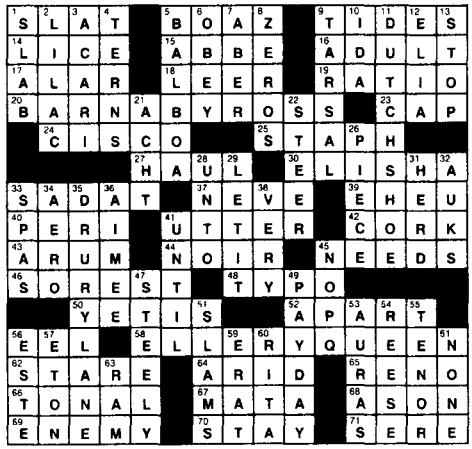
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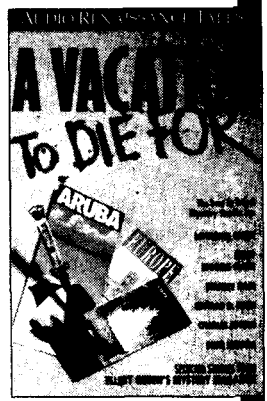

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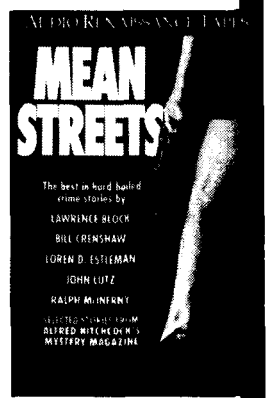

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a *NEW* short story by

BILL PRONZINI

So diverse are Bill Pronzini's interests in the mystery genre that we are not sure how he will be best known to our readers. He is the author of at least two hundred short stories, novels under his own name and six pseudonyms (that we know of), and many critical and biographical works. He is also the editor of several distinguished anthologies and a regular contributor to fanzines such as the Armchair Detective. *It has been some time since* EQMM *has had a story from Mr. Pronzini; he rejoins us with a spine-tingling tale about a game with deadly consequences . . .*

LIAR'S DICE

by BILL PRONZINI

"Excuse me. Do you play liar's dice?"

I looked over at the man two stools to my right. He was about my age, early forties; average height, average weight, brown hair, medium complexion—really a pretty nondescript sort except for a pleasant and disarming smile. Expensively dressed in an Armani suit and a silk jacquard tie. Drinking white wine. I had never seen him before. Or had I? There was something familiar about him, as if our paths *had* crossed somewhere or other, once or twice.

Not here in Tony's, though. Tony's is a suburban-mall bar that caters to the shopping trade from the big department and grocery stores surrounding it. I stopped in no more than a couple of times a month, usually when Connie asked me to pick up something at Safeway on my way home from San Francisco, occasionally when I had a Saturday errand to run. I knew the few regulars by sight, and

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it was never very crowded anyway. There were only four patrons at the moment: the nondescript gent and myself on stools, and a young couple in a booth at the rear.

"I do play, as a matter of fact," I said to the fellow. Fairly well too, though I wasn't about to admit that. Liar's dice and I were old acquaintances.

"Would you care to shake for a drink?"

"Well, my usual limit is one . . ."

"For a chit for your next visit, then."

"All right, why not? I feel lucky tonight."

"Do you? Good. I should warn you, I'm very good at the game."

"I'm not so bad myself."

"No, I mean I'm *very* good. I seldom lose."

It was the kind of remark that would have nettled me if it had been said with even a modicum of conceit. But he wasn't bragging; he was merely stating a fact, mentioning a special skill of which he felt justifiably proud. So instead of annoying me, his comment made me eager to test him.

We introduced ourselves; his name was Jones. Then I called to Tony for the dice cups. He brought them down, winked at me, said, "No gambling now," and went back to the other end of the bar. Strictly speaking, shaking dice for drinks and/or money is illegal in California. But nobody pays much attention to nuisance laws like that, and most bar owners keep dice cups on hand for their customers. The game stimulates business. I know because I've been involved in some spirited liar's dice tournaments in my time.

Like all good games, liar's dice is fairly simple—at least in its rules. Each player has a cup containing five dice, which he shakes out but keeps covered so only he can see what is showing face up. Then each makes a declaration or "call" in turn: one of a kind, two of a kind, three of a kind, and so on. Each call has to be higher than the previous one, and is based on what the player *knows* is in his hand and what he *thinks* is in the other fellow's—the combined total of the ten dice. He can lie or tell the truth, whichever suits him; but the better liar he is, the better his chances of winning. When one player decides the other is either lying or has simply exceeded the laws of probability, he says, "Come up," and then both reveal their hands. If he's right, he wins.

In addition to being a clever liar, you also need a good grasp of mathematical odds and the ability to "read" your opponent's facial expressions, the inflection in his voice, his body language. The same

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skills an experienced poker player has to have, which is one reason the game is also called liar's poker.

Jones and I each rolled one die to determine who would go first; mine was the highest. Then we shook all five dice in our cups, banged them down on the bar. What I had showing was four treys and a deuce.

"Your call, Mr. Quint."

"One five," I said.

"One six."

"Two deuces."

"Two fives."

"Three treys."

"Three sixes."

I considered calling him up, since I had no sixes and he would need three showing to win. But I didn't know his methods and I couldn't read him at all. I decided to keep playing.

"Four treys."

"Five treys."

"Six treys."

Jones smiled and said, "Come up." And he had just one trey (and no sixes). I'd called six treys and there were only five in our combined hands; he was the winner.

"So much for feeling lucky," I said, and signaled Tony to bring another white wine for Mr. Jones. On impulse I decided a second Manhattan wouldn't hurt me and ordered that too.

Jones said, "Shall we play again?"

"Two drinks is definitely my limit."

"For dimes, then? Nickels or pennies, if you prefer."

"Oh, I don't know . . ."

"You're a good player, Mr. Quint, and I don't often find someone who can challenge me. Besides, I have a passion as well as an affinity for liar's dice. Won't you indulge me?"

I didn't see any harm in it. If he'd wanted to play for larger stakes, even a dollar a hand, I might have taken him for a hustler despite his Armani suit and silk tie. But how much could you win or lose playing for a nickel or a dime a hand? So I said, "Your call first this time," and picked up my dice cup.

We played for better than half an hour. And Jones wasn't just good; he was uncanny. Out of nearly twenty-five hands, I won two—*two*. You could chalk up some of the disparity to luck, but not enough to change the fact that his skill was remarkable. Certainly

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he was the best I'd ever locked horns with. I would have backed him in a tournament anywhere, anytime.

He was a good winner, too: no gloating or chiding. And a good listener, the sort who seems genuinely (if superficially) interested in other people. I'm not often gregarious, especially with strangers, but I found myself opening up to Jones—and this in spite of him beating the pants off me the whole time.

I told him about Connie, how we met and the second honeymoon trip we'd taken to Lake Louise three years ago and what we were planning for our twentieth wedding anniversary in August. I told him about Lisa, who was eighteen and a freshman studying film at UCLA. I told him about Kevin, sixteen now and captain of his high-school baseball team, and the five-hit, two home run game he'd had last week. I told him what it was like working as a design engineer for one of the largest engineering firms in the country, the nagging dissatisfaction and the desire to be my own boss someday, when I had enough money saved so I could afford to take the risk. I told him about remodeling our home, the boat I was thinking of buying, the fact that I'd always wanted to try hang-gliding but never had the courage.

Lord knows what else I might have told him if I hadn't noticed the polite but faintly bored expression on his face, as if I were imparting facts he already knew. It made me realize just how much I'd been nattering on, and embarrassed me a bit. I've never liked people who talk incessantly about themselves, as though they're the focal point of the entire universe. I can be a good listener myself; and for all I knew, Jones was a lot more interesting than bland Jeff Quint.

I said, "Well, that's more than enough about me. It's your turn, Jones. Tell me about yourself."

"If you like, Mr. Quint." Still very formal. I'd told him a couple of times to call me Jeff but he wouldn't do it. Now that I thought about it, he hadn't mentioned his own first name.

"What is it you do?"

He laid his dice cup to one side. I was relieved to see that; I'd had enough of losing but I hadn't wanted to be the one to quit. And it was getting late—dark outside already—and Connie would be wondering where I was. A few minutes of listening to the story of his life, I thought, just to be polite, and then—

"To begin with," Jones was saying, "I travel."

"Sales job?"

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"No. I travel because I enjoy traveling. And because I can afford it. I have independent means."

"Lucky you. In more ways than one."

"Yes."

"Europe, the South Pacific—all the exotic places?"

"Actually, no. I prefer the U.S."

"Any particular part?"

"Wherever my fancy leads me."

"Hard to imagine anyone's fancy leading him to Bayport," I said. "You have friends or relatives here?"

"No, I have business in Bayport."

"Business? I thought you said you didn't need to work. . . ."

"Independent means, Mr. Quint. That doesn't preclude a purpose, a direction in one's life."

"You do have a profession, then?"

"You might say that. A profession and a hobby combined."

"Lucky you," I said again. "What is it?"

"I kill people," he said.

I thought I'd misheard him. "You . . . what?"

"I kill people."

"Good God. Is that supposed to be a joke?"

"Not at all. I'm quite serious."

"What do you mean, you *kill* people?"

"Just what I said."

"Are you trying to tell me you're . . . some kind of paid assassin?"

"Not at all. I've never killed anyone for money."

"Then why . . . ?"

"Can't you guess?"

"No, I can't guess. I don't want to guess."

"Call it personal satisfaction," he said.

"What people? Who?"

"No one in particular," Jones said. "My selection process is completely random. I'm very good at it too. I've been killing people for . . . let's see, nine and a half years now. Eighteen victims in thirteen states. And, oh yes, Puerto Rico—one in Puerto Rico. I don't mind saying that I've never even come close to being caught."

I stared at him. My mouth was open; I knew it but I couldn't seem to unlock my jaw. I felt as if reality had suddenly slipped away from me, as if Tony had dropped some sort of mind-altering drug into my second Manhattan and it was just now taking effect. Jones and I were still sitting companionably, on adjacent stools now, he smil-

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ing and speaking in the same low, friendly voice. At the other end of the bar Tony was slicing lemons and limes into wedges. Three of the booths were occupied now, with people laughing and enjoying themselves. Everything was just as it had been two minutes ago, except that instead of me telling Jones about being a dissatisfied design engineer, he was calmly telling me he was a serial murderer.

I got my mouth shut finally, just long enough to swallow into a dry throat. Then I said, "You're crazy, Jones. You must be insane."

"Hardly, Mr. Quint. I'm as sane as you are."

"I don't believe you killed eighteen people."

"Nineteen," he said. "Soon to be twenty."

"Twenty? You mean . . . someone in Bayport?"

"Right here in Bayport."

"You expect me to believe you intend to pick somebody at random and just . . . murder him in cold blood?"

"Oh no, there's more to it than that. Much more."

"More?" I said blankly.

"I choose a person at random, yes, but carefully. Very carefully. I study my target, follow him as he goes about his daily business, learn everything I can about him down to the minutest detail. Then the cat and mouse begins. I don't murder him right away; that wouldn't give sufficient, ah, satisfaction. I wait . . . observe . . . plan. Perhaps, for added spice, I reveal myself to him. I might even be so bold as to tell him to his face that he's my next victim."

My scalp began to crawl.

"Days, weeks . . . then, when the victim least expects it, a gunshot, a push out of nowhere in front of an oncoming car, a hypodermic filled with digitalin and jabbed into the body on a crowded street, simulating heart failure. There are many ways to kill a man. Did you ever stop to consider just how many different ways there are?"

"You . . . you're not saying—"

"What, Mr. Quint? That I've chosen *you?*"

"Jones, for God's sake!"

"But I have," he said. "You are to be number twenty."

One of my hands jerked upward, struck his arm. Involuntary spasm; I'm not a violent man. He didn't even flinch. I pulled my hand back, saw that it was shaking, and clutched the fingers tight around the beveled edge of the bar.

Jones took a sip of wine. Then he smiled—and winked at me.

"Or then again," he said, "I might be lying."

". . . What?"

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"Everything I've just told you might be a lie. I might not have killed nineteen people over the past nine and a half years; I might not have killed anyone, ever."

"I don't . . . I don't know what you—"

"Or I might have told you part of the truth . . . that's another possibility, isn't it? Part fact, part fiction. But in that case, which is which? And to what degree? Am I a deadly threat to you, or am I nothing more than a man in a bar playing a game?"

"Game? What kind of sick—"

"The same one we've been playing all along. Liar's dice."

"Liar's dice?"

"My own special version," he said, "developed and refined through years of practice. The perfect form of the game, if I do say so myself—exciting, unpredictable, filled with intrigue and mortal danger for myself as well as my opponent."

I shook my head. My mind was a seething muddle; I couldn't seem to fully grasp what he was saying.

"I don't know any more than you do at this moment how you'll play your part of the hand, Mr. Quint. That's where the excitement and the danger lies. Will you treat what I've said as you would a bluff? Can you afford to take that risk? Or will you act on the assumption that I've told the monstrous truth, or at least part of it?"

"Damn you . . ." Weak and ineffectual words, even in my own ears.

"And if you do believe me," he said, "what course of action will you take? Attack me before I can harm you, attempt to kill me . . . here and now in this public place, perhaps, in front of witnesses who will swear the attack was unprovoked? Try to follow me when I leave, attack me elsewhere? I might well be armed, and an excellent shot with a handgun. Go to the police . . . with a wild-sounding and unsubstantiated story that they surely wouldn't believe? Hire a detective to track me down? Attempt to track me down yourself? Jones isn't my real name, of course, and I've taken precautions against anyone finding out my true identity. Arm yourself and remain on guard until, if and when, I make a move against you? How long could you live under such intense pressure without making a fatal mistake?"

He paused dramatically. "Or—and this is the most exciting prospect of all, the one I hope you choose—will you mount a clever counterattack, composed of lies and deceptions of your own devising?

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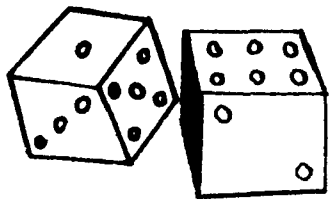
Can you actually hope to beat me at my own game? Do you dare to try?"

He adjusted the knot in his tie with quick, deft movements, smiling at me in the back-bar mirror—not the same pleasant smile as before. This one had shark's teeth in it. "Whatever you do, I'll know about it soon afterward. I'll be waiting . . . watching . . . and I'll know. And then it will be my turn again."

He slid off his stool, stood poised behind me. I just sat there; it was as if I were paralyzed.

"Your call, Mr. Quint," he said. And he was gone into the night.



DETECTIVERSE

REVENGE

by BRUCE MARTIN

The light-fingered dip at the mall
Was annoyed that the dick had the gall
To give him the heave,
So as he took his leave
He added his badge to the haul.

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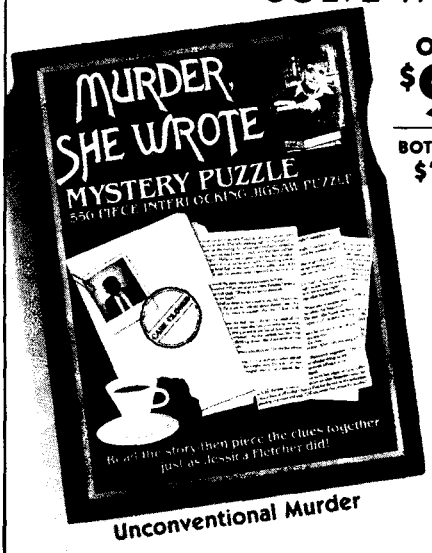
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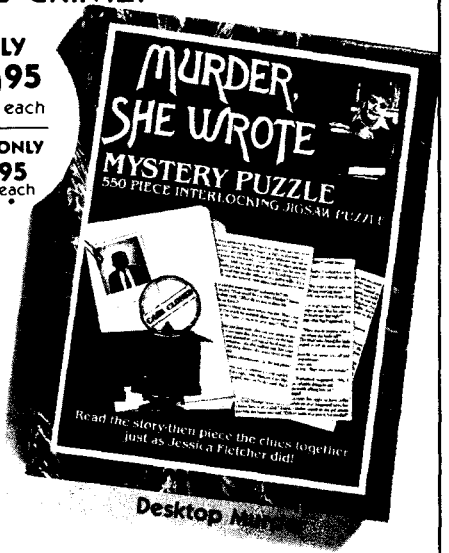
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a *NEW* Amos Walker story by

LOREN D. ESTLEMAN

In Loren Estleman's Amos Walker stories, the setting, Detroit, is almost as important as the hero. As the author explains: "(Amos's) co-star is the city of Detroit, that reformed prostitute of a town . . . It's the place where the American Dream stalled and sat rusting in the rain." (Twentieth Century Crime and Mystery Writers) *In this story, the first for* EQMM, *Walker investigates a crime in the record industry, a business inexorably bound up with the identity of the city . . .*

DEADLY FORCE

by LOREN D. ESTLEMAN

When I heard Redline Records had banned smoking everywhere in the renovated warehouse where it conducted business on Riopelle, I knew I'd find Ansel Albany sneaking a butt back in the stacks.

He saw me coming between racks of inflammable 78 and 45 rpm records and squashed out a Camel under one of his size fifteens. At fifty, he was white-haired and his complexion had faded from plum blue to medium grey, but he still looked like an old athlete. Following a disappointing season with the Pistons, the six-foot-nine Kettering graduate had joined the Detroit Police Department, where he served twelve years until he shot three suspects to death during an attempted liquor-store robbery on Woodward. The first two passed at the inquiry, but an eyewitness testified that Albany had given the third man a ten-second head start, then drew and shot him in the back through the glass door. Albany got the boot.

Whether the report was true or not—Ansel swore it wasn't—there was nothing false about the sixteen-inch Colt Python he wore

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strapped to his ribs under his old plaid jacket. I caught a glimpse of it when he reached out to accept the mailer I'd brought. He slid out the videotape and examined both sides. "Did you play it?"

"That's why the meet was in a video store," I said. "There might be copies, but I don't think you'll be hearing from them again."

"Rough 'em around, did you? Wish I could've been there to help."

"I told them next time you would be. It was easier on my knuckles."

He laughed once, a short deep bark, and slipped the tape back into the mailer and the mailer into his side pocket. "Management should've canned the little twerp when they found out he was into payola. But he's the front man and they're convinced he's another Barry Gordy."

"Here's two thousand back." I handed him a thick envelope. "They believed me when I told them Motown is dead and the local record business is depressed. All part of the service."

"I'd have shot the maggots."

"Why didn't you?"

"I'm paid to end trouble, not start it. And they demanded an outsider. What do we owe you, Walker?"

"Simple buy-back, no complications. A C-note ought to do it."

"Hell." He drew two bills from the envelope and held them out. "Buy a new suit with the extra hundred. You'll never get the stink out of the one you're wearing."

I took one of the bills. "We go back a long way, Ansel. Put it in your retirement fund."

"Who's retiring?"

I started to go. He called me back. His Masai features were unreadable. "If you won't accept tips, maybe you'll take work. A girl I know could use a break."

"What kind?"

"If I knew that I'd help her myself. Redline's got her on contract. Lately she's been missing sessions. Management was getting set to tout her as the new Diana Ross, but now they're talking about dropping her. She's got trouble but she won't say what."

I lit a Winston. "What's she to you?"

He drew himself up; all the way up, which was hard on my neck. "What's that mean?"

"Don't sweat it, Ansel. If she's your kid, swell. If she's your something on the side, that's swell too, but it makes a difference in the way I approach her. You know that."

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"Shoot." He relaxed. "I've been around these corporate twerps so long I'm starting to *act* like a pimp. Sheilah's just a sweet kid, used to stop by security on her way to the studio and pass the time of day. When I brought up the rumors and asked her if I could help, she walked out. Now she won't even look at me on her way past. Maybe a young stud like you could get something out of her. Color doesn't matter anymore, not in this business."

"Sheilah's her name?"

"With an H on the end. Sheilah Sorrell, that's the name on the label. You'll find her in Farmington Hills." He scribbled an address on his pocket pad and gave me the sheet. "She lives with Ronnie Madrid."

"The druglord?"

"Please. The entertainment mogul. He owns two comedy clubs in town and tried to buy this company."

"He can afford to. When his boys wiped out the Little Colombia mob he inherited the whole east side."

"You got something against free enterprise? A girl can't help who she falls in love with."

"Who pays?"

"Redline Records, who else?"

"You mean you."

He leaned back against the brick wall. His jacket fell open, exposing the big shiny magnum. "They pay me too much to keep out the pirates, and I'm too old to spend it on anything worthwhile."

"Like hell you are." I left.

The neighborhood was made up of large homes with clean lines, tucked between hills, not one of them more than twenty years old or worth less than three hundred thousand. The Madrid house was glass and brick with a red tile roof and a swimming pool that would have held my place in Hamtramck. Nice work for a kid who not so long ago was begging in the streets of Managua.

Ronnie Madrid, born Rafael Maldronado y Sanchez et cetera, had found a short cut Horatio Alger had overlooked. The only survivor of a family of Nicaraguan rebels massacred by Sandanistas, he'd been brought to Detroit by a distant relative while still in short pants, gone to work running dope for the Colombians, and become a bodyguard at age nineteen for Luis "El Tigre" Rodriguez; but he wasn't too good at that, because six weeks later the Tiger turned up bound and gagged and shot full of holes in the trunk of his Excalibur

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at City Airport. A gutter war raged for months. When it ended, Ronnie was the Man to See east of Cadillac Square for everything from mescaline to Mexican Brown. Twenty now, old enough to vote if he were a citizen, but still too young to buy beer, he was using his good looks, streetwise charm, and drug connections in South America to gain a foothold in the local entertainment industry, assuring himself both a legitimate front and a place to launder his money to Uncle Sam's taste. Like the man said, only in America.

The doorbell chimed "Spanish Harlem," no kidding. A maid whose ironclad features suggested she would know "Der Horst Wessel Lied" better carried my card back into the house and returned five minutes later to tell me Miss Sorrell would see me.

I waited in the entryway. The floor tiles were Mexican, Spanish needles grew in ceramic pots on either side of a curving staircase. A framed poster advertised a bullfight in Spanish on one wall. Inside the curve of the staircase stood a suit of Japanese armor, looking abashed.

"Awful, isn't it? Ronnie insisted on buying it. I told him it wouldn't go with the rest of the house, but you don't tell Ronnie anything."

She had come up on me while I was staring at the armor. She was small, with fine Jamaican features and skin as light as mine, which may have been why she wore her hair in cornrows and dressed in a stiff white cotton robe with African symbols painted on it in primary colors. Unbelted, it left her collarbone bare and covered her feet.

"Maybe he thinks he needs a tin suit," I said. "They'd be a sellout in high school parking lots."

"I'm Sheilah Sorrell. Did Ansel send you, Mr. Walker?" I'd written his name on the back of my card.

"He's fresh out of kittens caught in trees. He thinks you're in some kind of jam."

"I'm not. He's kind of like an uncle, always looking out for me. Can I offer you a drink, or are you on duty?"

"I'm not that kind of detective."

"I've got gin, Scotch—"

"Stop there."

She laughed a way only singers can, turned, and lifting her robe the way they do in Victorian movies, led the way into something they probably don't call a living room in houses like that. It was done in blue and white with French doors looking out on the sparkling pool. There was a small bar and a wall full of audio equipment that looked like the computer in *2001*. Sheilah Sorrell stepped be-

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hind the bar. "This is something I never let Greta do for Ronnie. I like mixing drinks. Water or ice?"

"A glass is fine."

She poured it from a cut-glass decanter, fixed herself something amber, and brought them over to a blue satin sofa. We sat down. She crossed a country block of smooth bare leg over the other and showed me a white leather sandal and coral polish on her toenails. "I'm sorry you wasted your time," she said. "Ansel's a mother hen."

"That mother hen was thrown out of the toughest police department in the country for misuse of deadly force." I drank. "Where's Ronnie?"

"Away on business. What did Ansel tell you?"

"He said you've been missing work."

"I'm a musician. I play a delicate instrument. My voice strains easily and I have to rest it. I don't expect a security man to understand that, but Redline should."

"He says there's talk of letting you go."

"They can't do that. I've got a contract."

"I heard someone say once that in show business a signed contract is considered the beginning of the negotiating process."

She smiled then. The colors in the room faded in the light. Then her gaze shifted. "Yes, Greta."

"Telephone, missus." The maid was standing in the doorway.

"Who is it?"

"He would not say. It is important, he said."

"I'll take it upstairs." She set her drink down untasted on the white coffee table and rose. "Excuse me, Mr. Walker. Play some music if you like." She went out, followed by Greta.

A cabinet contained several of Sheilah Sorrell's CDs. After a few minutes I figured out how to work the player—I haven't forgiven the music business for changing technologies just when I had amassed a collection of all my favorites on eight-track—and put one on, "Ev'ry Time We Say Goodbye." She ran Cole Porter through Motown and it came out like raw silk. I stood listening and looking at the pool for thirty seconds before the detective in me kicked in. The bar was stocked with wines and liquors I had only heard about. The carpet and drapes had been bought in New York. And Sheilah Sorrell had a pistol in the drawer of a blue lamp table.

It was a .22 magnum derringer, a two-shot and too delicate looking for an *hombre de guerra* like Madrid: it was nickel-plated and the sidegrips were mother-of-pearl. The engraving on the backstrap

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read: "Your Ace in the Hole. Ronnie." "Ace in the Hole" was another Cole Porter song in Sheilah's CD cabinet. The gun muzzle gave off a vanilla-flavored whiff of powder solvent. I tipped light into the barrels and looked inside. No dust. A thorough job of cleaning for a woman, and very recent.

I heard footsteps and returned the pistol to its drawer. The disc player was still making plaintive sounds in Sheilah's lost voice.

"Missus said she is sorry," the maid said. "She was called away."

"I didn't hear her leave."

"She is dressing. Call later," she said.

I drove around the corner and parked on the blind side of a bank of lilacs. Through the leaves I could see the front of the house. It was surrounded by a wrought-iron fence and the driveway was the only exit. For the neighbors' sake I pretended to be studying a road map. The map was of Arizona, and I had no idea what it was doing in my glove compartment.

Somewhere between Flagstaff and Tucson a bottle-green Jaguar chortled down the driveway in front of me. I slumped down until she passed, then threw aside the map, hit the ignition, and swung out behind. There were no other cars on the shady street and I gave the Jag two blocks.

We took Maple Road to Telegraph and points south, past West Bloomfield and neighborhoods that made Farmington Hills look like a welfare project—Ronnie Madrid's next stop on his way to Grosse Pointe, where the Spanish accents cut the grass and the residents thought a *contra* was a foreign convertible. Below Ten Mile Road the scenery broke down and became plain old Detroit. There the traffic was brisk and I closed up. On Seven Mile the Jaguar drifted into the parking lot of a Chinese restaurant and Sheilah got out and went inside. She had on a yellow cotton shift and dark glasses.

I found a space on the street and adjusted my rearview mirror to include the restaurant door. In a little while a burly black party in an electric blue suit walked past my car carrying a leather briefcase and entered the restaurant.

Things were getting interesting. I'd been visiting police headquarters the day they brought in Virgil Sweet for questioning in connection with a drive-by shooting at a crack house on Watson. Since then he'd gained about twenty pounds and several yards of expensive Italian tailoring. Two minutes after he went inside he came out and walked back the way he had come, without the briefcase.

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Sheilah Sorrell had it. She came clicking back across the parking lot, threw the item onto the front seat of the Jaguar, and got in with it. She took off with a chirp of rubber. Of course I followed.

We went downtown. Afternoon rush hour was thirty minutes away and we could have driven on the sidewalks for all the pedestrians we would hit. Finally she parked behind a produce truck on Monroe and got out carrying the briefcase. I wedged my car into a loading zone and shadowed her on foot. We crossed into Greektown, where restaurateurs with thick arms and white aprons to their ankles were sweeping out their establishments in preparation for the dinner trade. But Sheilah had had her fill of restaurants, and turned into Trapper's Alley instead.

I almost lost her in the crowd that was a fixture in the vertical shopping mall. When I spotted her she was on the escalator halfway to the second level. She never looked around. I might have been tailing her in an army half-track.

On the top level she stopped at a newsstand, bought a ticket for the People Mover, and went out on a tiled platform to wait. I bought one too and loitered among the magazines until the train came. We boarded with a small crowd. I hurried past her while she was settling herself on the molded bench under the windows and found a place to stand at the rear of the car.

The train slid out of the station, its motion as smooth as the graft that had built it. We stopped at Cadillac Center, Joe Louis Arena, Grand Circus. Some passengers got on, others left. Approaching Bricktown, the last stop before the station where we had boarded, Sheilah slid the briefcase under the bench and stood. When the doors opened, she stepped off. The briefcase remained behind. So did I.

I rode the circuit twice and started around again. Several stories below, the streets were thickening with traffic. Nobody touched the briefcase, hidden in the shadows. I had thought I knew what it contained, but when no one claimed it the trip started to look like a tryout, to see if Sheilah followed instructions. At Cadillac Center I got in with a knot of Japanese tourists waiting to alight and scooped up the case on my way through the doors. It felt heavy.

In the nearest men's room I tried to open the briefcase, but it was locked. There would be time enough to break into it later and remove the newspapers or whatever other useless items it held. I dropped a quarter into one of the telephones in the hallway outside and dialed John Alderdyce's number at police headquarters. A rumpled-looking

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business type in two-toned cordovans was using the other instrument. I turned my back on him.

"Walker, what's happenin'?" Alderdyce said. "I heard you died."

"That was three days ago. I'm back."

"What can I do for you, you blasphemous son of a bitch?" he asked brightly.

"What do you hear lately about Virgil Sweet?"

"Nothing good, and I read the obituaries every day. Word is he's partnered up with the Hispanics. Shooting kids on street corners is for the help. What about him?"

"Would one of those Hispanics be Ronnie Madrid?"

"That's the name I heard. We're looking for Ronnie, by the way. He missed an appointment."

"A hearing?"

"Prelim. Nobody's seen him in a duck's age. What's Sweet up to?"

I couldn't answer the question. I probably wouldn't have anyway. I saw movement reflected in the shiny black surface of the telephone. Then a purple light exploded in my skull and I didn't see anything for a while.

I woke up to a white glare. Someone was moving a penlight back and forth between my pupils. I said, "Turn that off or I'll use it to take your temperature." That was the planned speech. It came out in some dead language.

"Dilation normal," muttered a voice I didn't know. "How many fingers am I holding up, son?"

"December 7, 1941." That at least sounded like English, winched up from the bottom of a dusty shaft.

Someone else chuckled. I knew John Alderdyce's sinister mirth. I was lying on my back on the hard floor in the short passage outside the men's room at Cadillac Center. The man with the penlight and the fingers was supporting my head with one hand. He was a balding person with thick-rimmed glasses and a long tragic face that looked medical. Beyond this were John's brutal black features, gentling slightly as he spread into middle age. "I had your call traced," he said. "I almost arrested the doc here when I found him bending over you. I thought that 'Stand back, I'm a doctor' line went out with Louis B. Mayer."

I said, "The briefcase."

"What briefcase?"

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"That answers one question. Got a light?" I sat up and patted my pockets. My head expanded like an airbag.

The doctor sat back on his heels. "You should check yourself into Emergency. You could be concussed."

"Walker bounces backhoes off his skull Saturdays." John speared a mentholated cigarette between my lips from the pack he was always quitting from and lit it off a disposable lighter. It tasted like Old Spice.

"In that case, sign this." The doctor snapped open a folded sheet from a pocket and held it and a pen under my nose. It was a form releasing him from liability. I scribbled my name at the bottom and he was gone like Clayton Moore.

"What's new?" John asked.

I grabbed his arm and jacked myself vertical. My head kept expanding. It was going to hurt like hell when it finally burst. The small crowd we'd collected began to fade. "I make it Ronnie Madrid was kidnapped," I said, leaning against the wall. "Sheilah Sorrell, his squeeze, told me he was away on a buy, but someone called the house and she was in a lather to leave after that. She met Virgil Sweet in a Chinese place on Seven Mile and he gave her a briefcase. She left it on the People Mover. When nobody claimed it I figured it was a trial run, snatched the case myself, and called you. That's when the sky fell on me."

"Ronnie Madrid's dead."

I waited.

"Metro called just as I was leaving the office," he said. "Somebody put two in him and dumped him behind a video arcade on Michigan Avenue. Customers heard a car tearing away about five this afternoon."

"That was just about the time his girlfriend caught the train."

"They must've been pretty sure she'd deliver."

"Who do you like for it?" I asked.

"The guy was a dealer. Tomorrow morning I'll sit down with the city directory and check off the names of the ones I *don't* like for it." He watched me crush out the cigarette. "You okay? Maybe the doc was right about having yourself looked at."

"It was just my head."

"Get a hinge at the sapper?"

"Just for a second. A legend died today; I didn't spot the tail when I left the train. He was waiting for me when I came out of the toilet, pretending to be making a call. He looked like a bad salesman." I

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described what I remembered, including the flashy cordovans.

"Pudge Capstone," John said. "Legbreaker and bag man. Does a little bodyguarding when he feels like being legit. He's got a thing for fancy footwear."

"How about a lift to my car? I'm sick of trains."

"Sure. I've only got a half-dozen homicides waiting for me back at the shop."

"Thanks, John. I was afraid I'd be imposing." I tested the pulpy spot on the back of my head. My finger didn't go in, so I was only half done. "Capstone ever do any bodyguarding at Redline Records?"

"Maybe. Some of those rockers need protection. Why?"

"Just a thought. You'd be surprised what a knock on the head does for the faculties of reason."

"In that case you must be the most reasonable guy in town," he said.

The bell played several bars of "Spanish Harlem" before Sheilah Sorrell came to the door. She had on the African robe I'd seen before, as if she'd never been out of it.

"Where's Eva Braun?" I asked.

"If you mean Greta, it's her night off. I'm a little tired now, Mr. Walker. Call me tomorrow." She started to close the door. My shoulder got in the way.

"Tonight's better. By tomorrow the place will be crawling with cops."

She took a step back. I slid in through the opening and pushed the door shut behind me. The house looked the same, right down to the Oriental armor. I wondered if Ronnie had had time to regret leaving it at home.

"What is it, Mr. Walker?"

"I thought you might like to know there's an all-points out for Pudge Capstone. My guess is when they get him he'll talk. Murder's out of his line."

"I don't know anyone by that name."

"Sure you do. You hired him to take me down and grab the ransom you conned out of Virgil Sweet for Ronnie's release."

She looked at me, at the suit I'd wrinkled while napping on the floor at Cadillac Center. "You're drunk. Ronnie's in Miami."

"Ronnie's in formaldehyde and you know it. You put him there. The cops found him right where you had him dumped. Who did the dumping doesn't matter right now; it could have been anyone in

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pants. Men like to do you favors. Ask Ansel Albany."

She turned toward the living room. "I'm calling the police."

"Ask them what's keeping them," I said. "On my way here I stopped and left a message for a friend at headquarters. I was with him a little while ago and could have told him in person, but I wanted time with you first."

She turned back. "Maybe I'm the one who's drunk. I don't follow you."

"You should've ditched the gun after you shot Ronnie. Could be you clean and oil it as regularly as any good N.R.A. granny, but I doubt it. You must have dirtied it recently. It's my hunch Pudge worked for Redline a time or two, and you found out he was good for the rough stuff. Why you killed Ronnie isn't important. Maybe it was an accident, because an ambitious young dealer like he was would be worth a lot more to you alive than any ransom as long as you could hold him. Maybe you found out you couldn't, and reacted badly. Anyway, you made the most of it, stashed the stiff someplace while you convinced Virgil Sweet his partner had been kidnapped by a rival outfit and that they'd told you to deliver the ransom alone. Sweet came through with the cash today and you went through the motions of a drop because you knew I was watching. Pudge was already aboard the train when you and I got on. He hits hard."

Her face was like something carved from teak. "That's a lot to draw from a freshly cleaned gun. I mean, without a laboratory."

"The gun was just part of it. Things moved just a little too fast once I came in. I had the feeling the party was waiting for me to arrive before it heated up."

"Yes." It was just a word to fill the silence. The teak split. A tear slicked her cheek. "I didn't want him to hit me anymore."

"Who, Ronnie?"

"He'd hit me so many times. I was so bruised I stayed home from the studio so I wouldn't have to show my face. I don't even remember what it was we were fighting about this time. He came at me and I used this." She drew the derringer out of the pocket of her robe and pointed it at me. "He gave it to me for protection."

"You don't need it now. You need a lawyer." Keep her talking.

"It was my ace in the hole. I shot him and he fell."

She gave me the gun.

"As anybody would, with two slugs in him." I put the two-shot in my coat pocket.

She said, "I only shot him once."

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* * *

He wasn't in his office, a crabbed little accident of a room created when two walls were improperly joined; warehouse architecture is not the UN building. But I knew where to look.

The light shed by the ceiling funnels in the big echoing room where Redline stored its old recordings fell short of the floor, making the tall racks look as if they were floating on shadow. I could smell Ansel's tobacco smoke in the air. I called his name. No answer.

The racks were arranged like library stacks with wide aisles running between them. I walked along the ends. One, two, three aisles, all unoccupied. Four . . .

Something clipped the corner of a record sleeve near my right ear, followed closely by a report that swallowed up all the air in the room. I jumped back, snapping my Smith & Wesson from its belt clip.

"Walker?"

Ansel's voice, at large somewhere in the big room.

Crouching behind the rack I said, "She could have used her one telephone call on a lawyer, but she called you. That's something, anyway."

"Go home, Amos. I don't have so many friends I can afford to start killing them off."

"Ansel, the cops are on their way. I just left John Alderdyce at Ronnie Madrid's house with Sheilah. Ronnie was shot twice, John said. Once with a twenty-two and once with a forty-four; a magnum from the way it penetrated. Why'd you do it?"

"You're telling it."

I had a hunch he was moving around. He was silent on his feet, but he wouldn't stay in the same place under those circumstances. I backed up, putting another rack between us. "The way I see it, you were aware of the situation between Ronnie and Sheilah and told her to call you the next time he threatened to beat her up," I said. "She did, but by the time you got there she'd plugged him once already. You finished the job."

"It wasn't the first time I killed a man to protect someone."

"I heard it was three men."

"No, that was another time. Can you blame me for this one?"

"Not so much for the kill. You shouldn't have tried to make a buck off it."

"The son of a bitch hid all his cash and he didn't have life insurance. If you charged him ten bucks for every one of Sheilah's bruises,

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he still came out ahead. Did you think I was going to take any of it for myself?"

"Where is it?"

In the little silence that followed I could hear the air moving. "Pudge was supposed to bring it straight to Sheilah. Didn't the cops find it at her place?"

"Not on the first search. I didn't hang around to watch them steam off the wallpaper."

"I don't have it. I was busy ditching the body." He laughed his short deep bark. "Who thought Pudge would have the brains to look inside the briefcase?"

"He's been a bag man a long time. Maybe he finally got curious."

The tip of a long shadow fluttered on the brick wall at the end of the aisle. Ansel was searching the aisles one by one. I looked at the record rack nearest me. It was solid, reinforced with angle irons and tiered like bookshelves. I holstered the revolver and began climbing.

"You should've left things as they fell." I raised my voice to cover the creaking. "It would've been self-defense for Sheilah and justifiable homicide for you. Framing a snatch makes it look like murder."

"Capping a druglord isn't murder." He was close now. His foot scuffed concrete two or three aisles over.

When I was six feet above the floor, I stretched a leg and gained a foothold on the rack across the aisle. Now I was straddling the space between. Reaching for my gun I almost lost my balance. I caught myself and double-handed the Smith & Wesson, training it a few feet up the wall. Through the space between two tiers of records I saw him coming around the corner into the next aisle, the glitter of the big .44 magnum.

"You used me, Ansel. You needed a reliable witness to report to the cops he saw the ransom drop, so you hired me to look in on Sheilah. You called her when you knew I was at her place, and when she ran out to meet Virgil Sweet you knew I'd be curious enough to follow. You set me up for a sapping so I wouldn't see too much. Every time I try to look at it your way my head starts hurting."

"It had to be your head," he said. "You were the only one I could count on to take the case that far. Tell you what. Since we're friends, I'll give you five seconds to make a break for the door. If you get to it before I finish counting, I'll let you keep running."

"You gave that liquor-store bandit ten."

"I'm older now. I need the edge."

"It doesn't have to be this way, Ansel."

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"Sure it does."

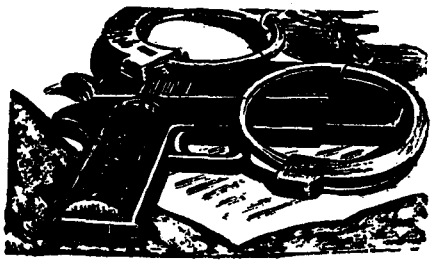
As he spoke he lunged around the end of the rack into my aisle. My voice must have told him I was there, because he squeezed off two quick shots that spanged off the brick wall behind me, at what would have been chest level if I were standing on the floor. Before he could adjust his aim upward I returned fire, smashing his forearm. The big shiny gun slammed to the floor.

He clutched the arm, staring up at me. He only had a minute before the pain and shock took away his speech. "That wasn't any kind of a fair chance."

"It's been a long day," I said. "I needed an edge too."

"That's how it starts." His knees started to bend.

They tried Sheilah Sorrell and Ansel Albany separately for murder and conspiracy to commit extortion. The jury hung on Sheilah—there were only four women and it was easy to figure which way they split—and the prosecution decided against retrial. The police in Romulus picked up Pudge Capstone at Detroit Metropolitan Airport with $200,000 in twenties and fifties in a carry-on bag and a ticket to Mexico City in his pocket. And every time my work takes me to Jackson, I stop in at the state penitentiary to visit Ansel. I don't have so many friends I can afford to drop one just because he tried to kill me.



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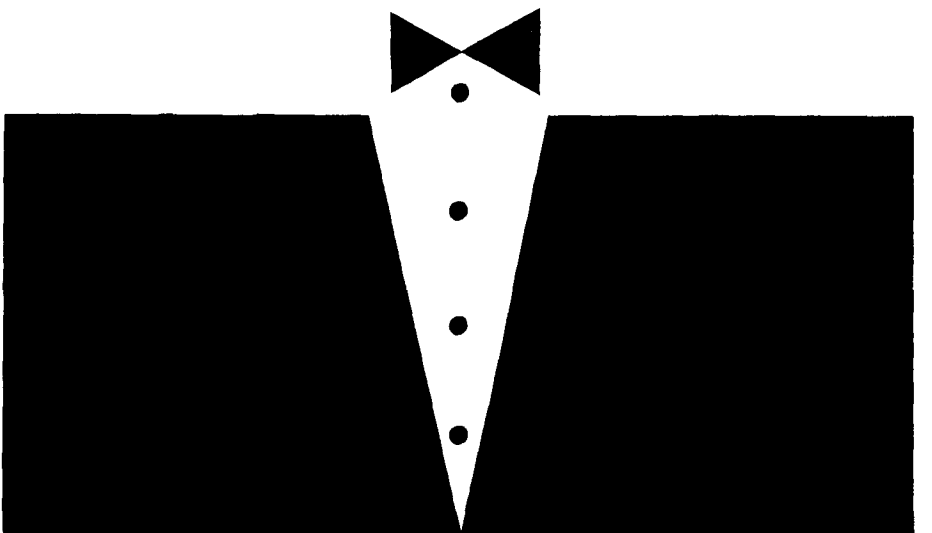

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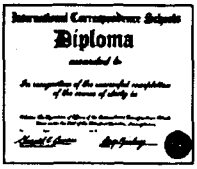

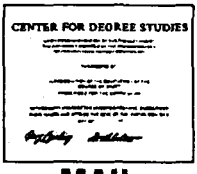

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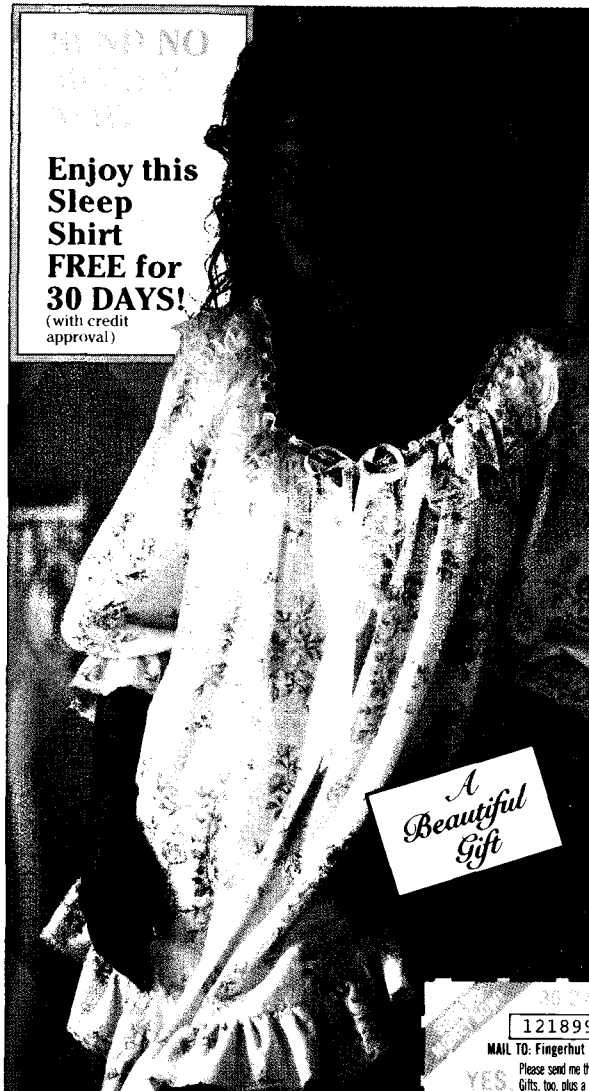

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*4 monthly payments, plus $2.22 for shipping and handling will be added to each payment.

We reserve the right to substitute similar merchandise of equal or better quality. If substituted merchandise is not acceptable, you can return it postpaid during your free trial period without further obligation.

1218999 (with credit approval)

MAIL TO: Fingerhut Corporation, Box 2500, St. Cloud, MN 56395-2500

YES Please send me the Floral Print Poet's Shirt for my 30 day Free Trial. Send me my 2 Free Gifts, too, plus a Bonus 3rd Gift for ordering within 15 days.

Check desired size: ☐ S(8-10) ☐ M(12-14) ☐ L(16-18) **Product Code N3499**

Print Name _____

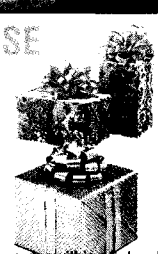
Address _____ **Apt. No.** _____

City _____ **State** _____ **Zip** _____

Home Phone (____) _____ **Date** _____

If I am delighted with my Sleep Shirt at the end of my 30 day Free Trial, I agree to pay the cash price of $29.96 plus shipping and handling (total cash price of $38.84) in 4 monthly installments of $9.71 each. Sales or use tax will be added where applicable. I understand that I may return the Sleep Shirt at my expense if I am not completely satisfied at the end of my 30 day Free Trial. The Free Gifts are mine to keep. This order is subject to approval of my credit by Fingerhut. Offer good in USA only, including APO/FPO.

Please Sign ✓ _____



just for trying the Sleep Shirt!

Plus... A BONUS 3RD FREE GIFT if you order within 15 days!

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